

PRELIMINARY NOTES TOWARDS AN ACCOUNT OF THE “MOVEMENT OF POPULAR ASSEMBLIES”

The movement of the assemblies in the squares started completely unexpectedly on the 25th of May in Athens. It's unclear which was the initial group of people that took the initiative to post a call for a rally in Syntagma square on Facebook to express their “indignation” and anger at the government's austerity measures. It seems though that some people around a political group influenced by the later Castoriadis' democratic ideology were involved among others in that initiative. The call was publicized favourably by the mass media and during the first days there was a reference in the media to a banner that allegedly appeared in the Spanish mobilizations: “Shhh, do not shout, we will wake up the Greeks” or something like that. Of course, no one could expect what would follow.

The initial call was a declaration of independence and separation from political parties, representation and ideologies. It also declared the will to protest peacefully against the state management of the debt crisis and “all those who led us here”. Furthermore, a main slogan was the call for a “real democracy”. The slogan of “real democracy” was quickly replaced after a couple of days by the slogan of “direct democracy”. The initial effort of the organizers to set a body of specific democratic rules for the assembly was rejected by the participants. However, certain regulations were established after some days concerning the time-limit of the speeches (90 sec), the way that someone can propose a subject for the discussion (in written form, two hours before the beginning of the assembly) and the way that speakers are being chosen (through a lottery).. We should also mention that around the core of the general assembly there are always plenty of discussions, events or even confrontations among the participants.

In the beginning there was a communal spirit in the first efforts at self-organizing the occupation of the square and officially political parties were not tolerated. However, the leftists and especially those coming from SYRIZA (Coalition of Radical Left) got quickly involved in the Syntagma assembly and took over important positions in the groups that were formed in order to run the occupation of Syntagma square, and, more specifically, in the group for “secretarial support” and the one responsible for “communication”. These two groups are the most important ones because they organize the agenda of the assemblies as well as the flow of the discussion. It must be noted that these people do not openly declare their political allegiance and appear as ‘individuals’. However, these politicians are unable to completely manipulate such a volatile and heterogeneous assembly since the delegitimization of the political parties is prevalent. It is very difficult to participate as an individual in these specific groups though, since you have to confront the shadow party mechanisms of the leftists.

The rallies organized on a daily basis gradually became very massive and expressed the complete delegitimization of the government and of the political system in general. In the most massive rally maybe 500.000 people participated (on Sunday 5/6).

The social composition of the mixed crowd that rallies everyday ranges from workers, unemployed, pensioners and students to small entrepreneurs or former small bosses hard hit by the crisis. In these rallies in the Syntagma square, a divide was formed from the first days between those who are “above” (near the Parliament) and those who are “below” (in the square proper). In the first category, some nationalist and extreme right-wing groups have been active from the beginning influencing the more conservative and/or less politicized people who participate in the demonstrations (being either proletarians or proletarianized former small entrepreneurs). It is quite common for most of them gathering outside the Parliament to wave Greek flags, make the open palm gesture against the MPs, cry out populist and nationalist slogans like “Traitors!” or “Thieves!” or even sing the national anthem. However, the fact that these people are more politically conservative does not necessarily mean that they are more

controllable when the conflicts with the police escalate or that they can be counted to the lines of the organized extreme right-wing groups. On the other hand, the second group which forms the constituency of the assembly is much more oriented to the democratic left (patriotic, antifascist, anti-imperialist) as it can be seen by the voted communiqués (see <http://real-democracy.gr>) and is also proletarian in composition (unemployed workers, civil servants, university students, workers from the private sector, etc.)

The leftists have managed to organize a series of discussion events about the “debt crisis” and about “direct democracy” with invited speakers coming from the left academia (e.g. left political economists like Lapavistas) who are connected to various left political parties (mainly SYRIZA and ANTARSYA). The organization of these events reproduces and reinforces the divide between “experts” and “non-experts” and the content of the presentations of the invited speakers has been centered on an alternative political and economic management of capitalist relations and the crisis. For example, the main views expressed with regard to the issue of debt vary from proposals for the “debt restructuring” and the cancellation of the “odious part of the debt” to calls for an immediate suspension of payments on the part of the Greek state or exit from the Eurozone and the EU. In any case, the political content expressed in these events is that of an alternative and more patriotic path for the “development of the country” and the creation of a real social-democratic state. In other words, these events try to direct the discussions towards an alternative path for the reproduction of capitalist relations in Greece that will be implemented by a different government in which the leftists will have assumed the role they deserve... Occasionally there have been criticisms by participants in the assembly of the prominent role of experts in panels as well as of the conception of the debt as a logistical, national issue, however they have been too weak to change the whole direction. The most well-known proposal for a left management of the “national debt” is coming from the Greek Audit Commission which consists of various left politicians, academics and union bureaucrats and favours the idea of the cancellation of the “odious part of the debt” following the Ecuador model. This Commission’s presence was established in the square in the first days against voted resolutions for the exclusion of political parties and organizations with the pretext of being a “citizens’ association”!

Some of us have been involved in a thematic assembly that has been formed by the general assembly around the issues of labour and unemployment called Group of Workers and Unemployed. In cooperation with other comrades, this assembly has tried to promote the self-organized practice of the proletarian “suspension of payments” from below for the direct satisfaction of our needs. Of course, the latter is completely at odds with the left political proposals for the “suspension of payments of the sovereign debt”. Towards this aim some interventions in unemployment offices have been organized calling the unemployed workers to join the group in Syntagma square and attempting to initiate discussions aiming at the organization of local assemblies of unemployed workers (the latter aim was unfortunately not successful). Also 3 direct actions in the metro station of Syntagma square have been organized where, in cooperation with a collective that is already active on this issue, the so-called “I don’t pay” coalition of committees, the ticket validating machines were blocked. The leftists who participate in this assembly have tried to confine its activities to left political demands of “the right to work”, “full, decent and stable work for all”, etc. without any real interest to communicate their struggle experiences (if they had any) and engage in collective direct action. The results of this confrontation are depicted in the communiqué which was produced and is available in <http://real-democracy.gr/en/node/159>. But, the main problem is that apart from us, some anti-authoritarians/anarchists and the leftists, the participation of other people both in the discussions and the actions is almost non-existent, although the actions which were organized have been agreed upon by the general assembly.

This leads to another important observation about the assembly of the Syntagma square. Notwithstanding that the assembly has taken all these days decisions involving the organization of direct actions, in the end very few people really participate in them. It seems that the direct

democratic process of just voting for or against a specific proposal in such a massive assembly tends to reproduce passivity and the role of the individualized spectator/voter.

This passivity and individualization of a significant part of the people was transcended on the day of the general strike (15/6) when the need to struggle against the attempts of the state to disband the demonstration and to reoccupy Syntagma square not only led practically to the participation of thousands of people in the conflicts with the police but also led to the expression of real solidarity between the demonstrators: people were freed from the hands of the cops by other protesters, the medical team helped anyone that was in danger because of the tear gas and the brutal strikes of the cops, the joyful dance of thousands of people amidst the tear gases, etc.

However, there were certain forces, i.e. the mass media, the left parties and the fascists, who tried to promote separations between the demonstrators around the issue of violence and through the accusation against some violent demonstrators of being instigated by police agent-provocateurs. When the anarchist/antiauthoritarian block and the blocks of the base unions arrived in Syntagma square and some of the comrades moved to the area in front of the parliament, a group of fascists exploited the throwing of a few (2-3) Molotov bombs by some individuals and started to shout through bullhorns to the demonstrators that the “kukuloforoï” (hooded persons) are undercover police provocateurs that should be isolated. This group started the attack against the anarchists/antiauthoritarians and managed to get other demonstrators involved in the attack as well. The anarchists/antiauthoritarians managed to face the attack and to respond successfully. However, the media exploited this incident by portraying it as an attack of the anarchists against the “indignants” (as the crowds demonstrating in the square are called) in order to promote the separation between “violent” and “peaceful” protesters within the movement. The video of this incident was played again and again for the rest of the day. However, on the level of street politics, this attempt was largely unsuccessful since when the police attacked later the demonstration they were confronted by a totally mixed crowd.

Apart from the media, the left parties tried as well to promote the separation between “violent” and “peaceful” protesters through their “provocateurology” and the continuous accusations and propaganda against the anarchist/antiauthoritarian milieu. Their aims are of course different: they want to restrain the movement to the limits of legality and peacefulness so that they will be able to capitalize on it politically according to their wishful thinking to participate in a future government that will follow an alternative left path for the development of Greek capitalism. We should add here that the Group of Workers and Unemployed of Syntagma square where some of us participate issued a resolution condemning provocateurology and false divisions within the movement but the text was never voted as a subject for discussion. This was the result of the leftist organizers’ intervention and manipulation combined with the weak support from other participants.

However, a lot of different views have been expressed concerning the issue of “provocateurology” and also the “*violent or pacifist character of our movement*”. The dynamic and contradictory character of the assembly can be traced to some of the assembly’s decisions two days before the 48-hour general strike on 28-29 of June. The left organizers managed to win a vote calling the police forces to “*show respect to people's will and the constitutional right of people's sovereignty [...] and not to prevent the people from protecting its own Constitution*”! At the same time, there was another resolution which condemned “*the professionals of violence who serve the system and not the movement*”, reflecting the leftist provocateurology against those who do not act according to the ideology of obedience to “law and order”. On the contrary, a day after, in another decision the assembly voted in favour of “*those who clash with the repression forces. Nobody with a loudspeaker should speak against them*”. On the same day, the proposal for “*condemnation of any kind of violence during the coming 48-hour strike*” was disapproved.

It must be noted that till now the “movement of the squares” has been really effective in the sense that it managed to widen the field of opposition to the government’s policy, something that the conventional general strikes and the isolated sectional strikes had not managed to do. It

obliged the discredited GSEE to call for a 24-hour strike on the 15/6 and a 48-hour strike when the second “memorandum” was going to be voted and many workers took the opportunity to participate in the demos from morning till night. Although it did not manage to cancel the voting of the memorandum, it nonetheless managed to create a deep cabinet and political crisis. Never before, not even during the December 2008 riots, was the political system of representation so irretrievably delegitimised. However, the leftist organizers managed to preserve the mediatory role of unions -at least on an ideological level- through a common poster calling for the 48-hour general strike.

A first observation about this strike is that it’s impossible to make an accurate estimation of the number of people that took part in the events during these two days. There was a continuous inflow and outflow of people to and from the terrain of the struggle in the centre of Athens (i.e. the Syntagma square and the surrounding streets) and the number of demonstrators fluctuated from a few thousands to as many as 100.000 people. However, the participation in the strike, in the rally and in the conflicts was far lower on the first day than in the second day: the number of demonstrators in Syntagma square on Tuesday 28/6 did not exceed 20.000 people.¹ Both days, fierce clashes took place between demonstrators and the riot police over a large part of the centre of the city around Syntagma square. Thousands of chemical weapons were thrown by the riot police creating a toxic and suffocating atmosphere. Certainly, in the second day, the mobilization was more intense and more massive.

According to the police, 131 cops were injured, 75 persons were busted and charges were pressed against 38 people. According to the medical team of the Syntagma square, more than 700 people had been provided with first aid at the improvised medical centres in the square and inside the metro station of Syntagma and around 100 were transferred to hospitals. There were damages on banks, ministry buildings, luxurious hotels, the post-office of Syntagma square and a few commercial shops and restaurants.

There is no doubt that from the beginning the aim of the state was to evacuate the square, to terrorize and disperse the demonstrators.² However, the persistent and spirited stance of the demonstrators may be perfectly expressed by the slogan: “we won’t leave the square”. As a result, the confrontation with the police, material and verbal, was almost continuous. On the first day, most of the people were pushed further back in the streets surrounding the square, giving longer or shorter battles, until the police managed to create a cop-boundary around the square, preventing anyone from approaching. Despite that, a few hundreds remained in the square until late in the night.

¹ The fact that most of the people chose to strike on the 2nd day of the 48-hour general strike, when the “medium-term fiscal consolidation framework programme” was voted, emphatically revealed the ideological and deceptive character of the leftist calls for an indefinite general strike. The big reduction in the income and the resources of the workers combined with a full-fledged crisis of the unions make such a prospect totally impossible, at least in the short-term both on the objective and the subjective level. Therefore, the leftist calls for an indefinite general strike are devoid of any real content and are used as a pseudo-militant propaganda in order to hide their total inability and/or unwillingness to engage in the organization of relevant and practical direct actions promoting the proletarian “suspension of payments” from below. The cadres of all the leftist parties and groupuscules are much more keen on retaining their institutional positions in the various unions, associations and non-governmental organizations than promoting any real class antagonistic activity.

² As it was revealed later in the media, this aim was planned and decided on a high-level conference of generals of the Greek police already on Tuesday and shows both the importance the government placed on the voting of the new austerity measures as well as the absurdity of the theory of the “provocation” of the cops through violence. Besides, from heated conversations between riot cops and demonstrators we can conclude that those squads must have had some kind of ideological training by government officials so that no moral doubts could stand in their way of executing orders: the dominant argument was that the majority of the demonstrators are “public servants who have lost their privileges”...

On the second day, apart from the gathering in the Syntagma square, there were efforts to make blockades early in the morning in order to prevent the MP's entrance into the parliament. This plan was voted by the Syntagma assembly as well as by the assemblies that have been formed in other neighbourhoods of Athens outside the centre. Unfortunately, only a few hundreds of demonstrators participated in those blockades which were immediately attacked fiercely, pushed away and quickly disbanded by the police. So, the plan to prevent politicians from getting into the parliament didn't work. In the case of the blockade in Vasileos Konstantinou avenue, the demonstrators were pushed back to nearby streets where they erected barricades and after a few hours and some mild confrontations with the riot police they started a long demonstration that passed through the touristic parts of the centre to finally reach the big rally in Syntagma square. It must be noted that the organization of the blockades was totally inefficient since the leftist organizations that played an important role through their control of the main groups of the Syntagma assembly did nothing to ensure a greater participation and a real confrontation with the police. Of course, the leftists' attitude is not an excuse for the inability of the assembly itself to implement its decisions and the passivity of a great part of its participants.

As far as the conflicts around the parliament are concerned, similar scenes of the first day took place on the second day as well but it was much more difficult for the police to accomplish its aims. Thousands of demonstrators participated in the clashes of the second day. Most of the demonstrators were prepared for the clashes wearing gas masks or other improvised protection equipment; many carried anti-acid solutions while some were fully equipped for fighting the cops. In most cases, there was a "front zone" where the battles evolved and a "rear zone" where people yelled slogans, gave help to those in need and even "provided" the "front zone" with new people.

The "peaceful people" backed those clashing with the police: the physical presence of the huge crowd itself was an obstacle to the maneuvers of the police. Protesters blocked a group of motorcycles of the police infamous "DIAS" and "DELTA" forces by standing in front of them while the policemen were ready to launch an attack. "Peaceful" protesters weren't scared by the clashes and only the continuous massive and violent attacks of riot police and motorcycle police forced them to abandon the streets surrounding Syntagma. Contrary to what many were preaching during the previous days and especially during the clashes with the police on June 28th, the clashes didn't "frighten" the "people" but in a sense these clashes expressed the accumulated anger against a largely delegitimized government, the brutality of the police and the worsening of the living conditions of the working class.

Especially this day, there reappeared the insurgents of December 2008 (anarchists, anti-authoritarians, students, ultras, young precarious proletarians) in the streets of Athens alongside a considerable part of the more "respectable" and stable working class that protested against the austerity measures clashing with the police. It was the first time after May 5, 2010 that such a thing happened.

The 48-hour general strike had another similarity with the December 2008 rebellion: playfulness. Many slogans or chants of the protesters against the government and the IMF are based on slogans or chants from the terrace culture while during the confrontations with the police drummers encouraged the protesters and incited them to keep their positions.

Both days, the police eventually "cleared" the surroundings and the central streets late at night, and only few determined ones remained in the square overnight.

The thousands of people that participated in the clashes and their diversity defied in practice the conspiracy theories of the left organizations/parties and the media about "provocateurs" or "para-statal gangs" and proved how ridiculous similar mainstream propaganda about those "specific" groups who always "create chaos" is. Many people realized the necessity of throwing stones, lighting fires and barricading streets against armed, furious and ruthless cops who execute the orders of capital and its state.

This change was also the result of the overcoming of the (usually verbal) confrontations between the “non-violent” and the “violent” protesters during the last month’s mobilizations. Many “non-violent” protesters, especially the elder ones, realized at last that behind the “masks” of the “provocateurs” were mostly common young people, filled with rage. In a case, a sixty-year lady was talking in a friendly way with a “masked” 16-year old about the “right to fight back the cops” while at the same time well-dressed “indignant” protesters were disputing with “rioters” on similar matters. In other cases, “non-violent” people with breathing problems were helped by well-prepared “masked” demonstrators. Violence is just one issue in the continuous social and political discussions and disputes that emerge inside the mobilized crowd and play an important role in the shaping up of the mobilizations and the contradictory attitudes of many demonstrators. We can say that these disputes create a limited *proletarian public sphere* where theoretical and practical issues are posed.

Another prominent feature of the days of rage was the *combination of rioting and celebration*. During the fights there was live music, people sang and, as we mentioned before, in some cases drum players accompanied counter-attacks against the riot squads! During the afternoon of the 28th a concert was given despite the fights and chemical gases and the protesters were dancing while the police was tear-gasing the square. Expropriations of pastries, cakes and ice creams from a chain café in the square gave the struggle a sweet flavour on the 29th, although the food supply group later condemned lootings from the loudspeakers, probably after having been scolded by some left “organizers”. Later that afternoon a big group mainly of SYRIZA members tried to prevent people from piling up stones to be used against a possible attack by the riot squads, however, having no alternative plan to face the attack, they soon gave up their effort. Shortly after, the microphone equipment with the loudspeakers was removed from the square on the pretext that they could get damaged. The choice to take away the “voice” of the mobilization at that particular time, when clashes with the police in the surroundings of the square were still raging, was clearly undermining the defense of the square. Some minutes later a lot of riot squads invaded the square and in a particularly violent sweep operation managed to disperse the crowd down the metro station. Only some hundreds would return again and even less stayed in the square until late in the night.

We should also mention that the feeling of rage against politicians and the police is really growing. Except for the widespread clashes, this rage is also reflected in the verbal condemnations that one can catch here and there: “we should burn the parliament”, “we should hang them high”, “we should take up arms”, “we should *visit* the MP’s homes” etc. It’s remarkable that most of these declarations come from elder people. Several cases of “arrests” of undercover cops by loads of people are also revealing of the degree of anger mounting: in the evening of the 29th demonstrators got hold of an undercover cop inside the Syntagma metro station trying to detain him when the Red Cross rescuers intervened and helped him escape (according to some rumours, he had no gun when he left...).

As far as the role of the unions (GSEE-ADEDY) is concerned, except for their call for the 48-hour strike, which was more or less a result of the pressure of the “square’s movement”, they didn’t really play any important role. It is characteristic that their blocks attracted only few hundreds and on the second day, when the new austerity package would be voted, GSEE arranged its rally late in the afternoon in another square of the city centre (which was just a short stroll towards Omonia square which is in the opposite direction!)! In addition, on 30th of June, GSEE, faithful to the conspiracy theories, published a press release which condemned “*the destructions and the pre-decided riots between “hooded people” and the police who co-operate against the workers and the demonstrators [...] GSEE condemns any kind of violence wherever it comes from and calls the government to assume its responsibilities...*”. On the other hand, ADEDY kept a more cautious stance: in its press releases on the 29th and the 30th of June, it condemned the “*barbarism of the government*” and “*the police brutality*” against the demonstrators and it even called for a rally on the 30th June on Syntagma square which it never organized!

Some general points concerning the movement against the imposition of the harshest austerity measures since the 2nd World War:

1) Nationalism (mostly in a populist form) is dominant, favoured both by the various extreme right wing cliques as well as by left parties and leftists. Even for a lot of proletarians or petty-bourgeois hit by the crisis who are not affiliated with political parties, national identity appears as a last imaginary refuge when everything else is rapidly crumbling. Behind the slogans against the “foreign, sell out government” or for the “Salvation of the country”, “National sovereignty” and a “New Constitution” lies a deep feeling of fear and alienation to which the “national community” appears as a magical unifying solution. Class interests are often expressed in nationalist and racist terms producing a confused and explosive political cocktail.

2) The manipulation of the main assembly in Syntagma square (there are several others in various neighbourhoods of Athens and cities in Greece) by “incognito” members of left parties and organizations is evident and really obstructive in a class direction of the movement. However, due to the deep legitimization crisis of the political system of representation in general they, too, have to hide their political identity and keep a balance between a general, abstract talk about “self-determination”, “direct democracy”, “collective action”, “anti-racism”, “social change” etc on the one hand and extreme nationalism, thug-like behaviour of some extreme-right wing individuals participating in groups in the square on the other hand, and all this in a not so successful way.

3) A significant part of the antiauthoritarian milieu as well as a part of the left (especially the marxist-leninists and most of the trade unionists) keep their distance from the assembly or are openly hostile to it: the former accuse it mainly for showing tolerance towards the fascists in front of the parliament or the members of the defence group of the assembly and for being a petty bourgeois, reformist political body manipulated by certain left parties. The latter accuse it for being apolitical, hostile to the Left and the “unionized, organized labour movement”.

One thing is certain: this volatile, contradictory movement attracts the attention from all sides of the political spectrum and constitutes an expression of the crisis of class relations and politics in general. No other struggle has expressed itself in a more ambivalent and explosive way in the last decades. What the whole political spectrum finds disquieting in this assembly movement is that the mounting proletarian (and petit-bourgeois) anger and indignation is not expressed anymore through the mediation channels of the political parties and the unions. Thus, it is not so much controllable and it is potentially dangerous for the political and unionist representation system in general. Therefore, the role of provocateurology is crucial: it serves as an exorcism, a slander against a growing part of the population which exiled in the no man’s land of «parastatal activity» should be rendered inert. On another level, the multiform and open character of this movement puts on the agenda the issue of the *self-organization* of the struggle, even if the *content* of this struggle remains *vague*. The public debate on the nature of the debt is a thorny question since it could lead to a movement of “refusal of payments” to the Greek state (an issue well beyond the political horizon of the parties, the unions and the vast majority of the extra-parliamentary left, statist as it is). After the bloody voting of the Medium-term Programme is uncertain what direction the movement of the assemblies will take in an era where all certainties seem to melt in the air.

TPTG
11/7/2011