Re-inventing Spaces of Commoning: Occupied Squares in Movement.

Reinventar espais col·lectius: places ocupades en moviment.

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Abstract

In the recent occupied squares movement (including the Arab Spring uprisings and the worldwide Occupy movement), space commoning was a process that reinvented space-as-commons through collective action: space both as a good to be shared and as a form of organizing shared practices. This paper explores such processes of urban commoning and the ways in which they are connected to emerging communities in movement as well as to the creation of new kinds of political subjects. These subjects tend to escape dominant classifications of political and social identities and to participate in acts that create urban threshold spaces. Thus, liminality characterizes both the subjects and the spaces of the occupied squares movement.

Resum

Durant els recents moviments d'ocupació de les places (incloent les revoltes de la Primavera Àrab i el moviment Occupy a escala global), l'acció col·lectiva sobre l'espai ha propiciat un procés de reinvenció del mateix a partir de la idea dels *comuns*, és a dir, un espai més enllà de ser comú, també fa referència a l'organització de pràctiques compartides. L'objectiu d'aquest article és explorar aquest procés urbà de *fer ciutat* en comú i les formes en què el mateix està relacionat a les recents comunitats en moviment, així com als nous tipus de subjetivació política. Els subjectes que duen a terme aquest procés tendeixen a escapar-se a les classificacions dominants de les identitats polítiques i socials, i procuren participar en accions que produeixen espais urbans liminals. La liminalitat, de fet, caracteritza tant als subjectes com als espais del moviment d'ocupació de les places.

Key words: commoning; community; liminal spaces; political subjectification; Syntagma square occupation.

Paraules clau: fer en comú; comunitat; espai liminal, subjectivació política; ocupació de la plaça Syntagma.

1. Emerging communities

It is tempting to describe the occupied squares movement in terms of a resurfacing of a long suppressed need to feel connected to other people through a common cause. Communities allegedly emerge from such processes of "feeling in common", of being able to recognize defining similarities, of discovering and pursuing common collective identities. Equating community to the locus of a shared identity seems to be taken as a self-evident empirical truth as well as a self-evident law of social groupings. At the squares, however, a new way of experiencing and recognizing communities seems to have emerged. People, in their acts and manifestos, put an emphasis on the diversity of the participants' social origins, on the plurality of their opinions, on the coexistence of different initiatives, on the multiplicity of expressions and performances.

A common cause was indeed always evoked, not simply as a unifying core of different events, actions and discourses but, rather, as a potential activating source, which could give meaning to and align various initiatives. Communities formed in this way were not created because a shared "ethos" became a kind of coercive social glue but because people gathered in places in which possibilities of being in common were to be re-discovered. As Zygmunt Bauman rightly maintains, "Neither the patriotic nor the nationalist creed admits the possibility that people may belong together while staying attached to their differences [...]" (2000: 177). Richard Sennett has also heavily criticised contemporary "uncivilized communities" as "fantasies of collective life parochial in nature" (1977: 310). The kind of communities that emerged in the occupied squares can be called communities in movement because they were more like attempts to explore new forms of cooperation and sharing rather than established relations of belonging.

Jacques Rancière attempts to re-theorize "community" starting from the notion of "common world". He emphasizes the importance of being able to recognize a socially crafted "distribution of the sensible world". This world, however, according to him, is always more than a shared ethos and a shared abode. This world "is always a polemical distribution of modes of being and 'occupations' in a space of possibilities" (Rancière 2006: 42). Reducing this "space of possibilities" to a rigid social order means replacing politics with "police". For Rancière, what is at stake is a constant redefinition of the common. This is what creates a common world and this is what, consequently, is at the basis of understanding and symbolizing community.

"Police" is characterized by a way of conceiving community "as the accomplishment of a common way of being" whereas "politics" conceives community "as a polemic over the common" (Rancière 2010: 100). Inherent in the community is a process which recognizes the common as something at stake rather than a fact or unambiguous norm. When this dispute or polemic over the common is silenced, community ossifies. We could say that community becomes an ordered social universe rather than a process. Interpreting Rancière's understanding of the bond between community and politics, we could say that he sees community as an open political process, through which the meaning and the forms of living together are questioned and potentially transformed. In this prospect, Rancière is against consensus which he describes as a form through which "politics is transformed into police" (Ibid).

Can we however introduce to this theorizing of community a way of understanding consensus and dissensus that may describe the multifarious processes of creating agreement between people? During the squares' occupations these processes were not, as it seems, reduced to the well-known mechanism of manufacturing consent. And how can we profit from the rich discussions about "real democracy" which characterized all the occupied squares movements? Raul Zibechi has carefully observed the way neighbourhood communities in the city of El Alto, Bolivia, have organized their struggle against the privatization of water. He starts from the idea that "Community does not merely exist, it is made. It is not an institution, not even an organization, but a way to make links between people" (Zibechi 2010: 14). By tracing the actual practices through which communities organized their struggle, Zibechi found out that those links did not only produce a stable form of centralized leadership out of a series of recognizable social bonds. In the Aymara city of El Alto, community was not simply transported as an enduring model of social organization from rural areas to urban ones. Community form was, according to Zibechi, "re-invented", "re-created" (Ibid: 19). This kind of community was organized to cope with the everyday problems of a poor population which migrated en masse from rural areas and which based its survival on rich networks of solidarity. Community, thus, was actually a network of smaller micro-communities (the smallest unit of them being the neighbourhood block), each one with its local council and distinct decision-making assemblies. A form of dispersion of power was produced in practice which created various levels and forms of intra-neighbourhood cooperation (Ibid: 30).

During the days of struggle these communities fought against the usurpation of natural resources in many inventive ways. What characterized these ways was what one might describe as a dialectics of dispersal and regrouping:

> First of all there is a massive sovereign assembly; secondly, a series of multiple actions in the community, deployed in parallel; and thirdly, a regrouping, or rather a confluence, but of a much larger scale than the original (ibid 58).

Community thus, through the dispersed initiatives of the micro-communities which constitute its fabric, manages to fight both the external enemy, in this case the central privatization policy, and the internal one, the ever present danger of the concentration of power which inevitably creates hierarchies, exploitation and corruption. It is important to note that consensus was pursued on the level of massive neighbourhood assemblies, but decisions were more like guiding lines for dispersed and improvised initiatives of action, unified by the struggle's common cause as well as by a feeling of equal participation.

In Rancière's reasoning, these communities should be considered as political communities, as long as acts and decision making were not contained in a pre-established centralized order ("police"). What Rancière perhaps misses is that consensus can be a practice: a project which takes different shapes and does not have to reach a final and definitive stage. Communities that continue to define the common and place it into dispute are communities which practice commoning not only as producers of goods but also as producers of opinions, agreements and collective actions. Communities actually take shape through commoning, if by commoning we understand practices that produce common goods just as much as forms of social cooperation. "What is shared" and "how is something shared" are two political questions that cannot be asked separately (De Angelis 2007: 244). Commoning is a process which sustains social relations of sharing and identifies in

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and through sharing what should be considered as common. Commons, thus, are not natural goods (Roggero 2010: 361) but social stakes, i.e. socially important goods (material and immaterial) that are always already immersed in the social relations which produce and distribute them. Communities which are open to the potentialities of commoning are "communities in movement". Like in Zibechi's "societies in movement", in those communities there is a continuous "fight to encode/decode flows, or social relations in movement" (Ibid: 87).

Were the occupy movements, including the Spanish *indignados* and the Greek *aganaktismenoi*, formed through the practices of pre-existing communities? Were the squares' occupations the result of plans and decisions of specific collective subjects? As it appears, they were not. What happened, rather, is that these practices inaugurated processes of community making which had very interesting distinct characteristics. In Syntagma square in Athens, for example, a loose network of initiatives had woven the tapestry of occupation. Each initiative had created its own space, its own micro-square.

> Each micro-square had its own group of people who lived there for some days, in their tents, people who focused their actions and their micro-urban 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 centre, a multimedia group, a translation group stand, and so on (Stavrides 2012: 588).

Giving shape to every micro-square, a corresponding micro community was formed, a community with no boundaries, as concerns its members, but with specific forms of communication between them. This gave those emergent and continually in the making communities an open unifying tissue. People recognized themselves as members of the communities by participating at various levels and with varying degrees of consistency in different micro-community activities. This process would appear to recall the dispersion model which Zibechi identifies in the El Alto urban micro-communities. There is, however, an important difference that separates the Syntagma communities from those in El Alto. In Syntagma, micro-communities were organized as a hybrid of exemplary collective gestures and ad hoc experimentation of a different everydayness. In a way, those communities were developed by and developed through processes which redefined the meaning of being in common and the significance of recognizing certain goods and services as common.

The occupation's general assembly, which allowed everyone to participate, speak and vote, was a peculiar center for all those dispersed initiatives and their corresponding micro-spatialities, the micro squares. The assembly established the defining modes of collective action which characterized the occupation and distilled in discontinuous and sometimes contradictory ways the movement's characteristic values and aspirations (Giovanopoulos & Mitropoulos, 2011). Many times assembly resolutions avoided condemning or praising practices which were not approved or saw the participation of all, as in the case of practices of violent confrontation with the aggressive police forces. The assembly thus was not a dominant centre but an area where a potential osmosis of opinions and proposals was put to test. Unanimous or almost unanimous voting for the proposals was explicitly sought. Plurality was therefore not replaced by a forced synthesis of opinions that one would suppose to be necessary in pressing and exceptional

conditions. If we are to follow Zibechi's scheme, in the squares, dispersion and regrouping were not two distinct phases but rather a continuous process of de-centralization and re-centralization of acts and discourses, which continuously checked the limits of potential consensus. Characteristically, during the assemblies, speakers with a leftist or Marxist culture, obsessed with the idea that they were the movement's avant-garde, often faced gestures of disapproval when they attempted to force all others to adopt their ideas and proposals.

Social anthropology has provided us with examples of cultures in which collective decision-making is a long process which explicitly attempts to reconcile, through long and often chaotic discussions, inferences of opinion. Carlos Lenkersdorf, who studied for years the culture of Tojalabales people in Mexico, explicitly refers to such a process contradistinguishing it to Western representational democracy (Lenkersdorf 2004: 22). Consensus or agreement in these cases is the result of a latent process of negotiation which is not polemic, as are relevant processes in our western "agonistic" "democracies" (Mouffe 2000; Wenman 2013). Communities maintain their unity because they provide people space and time to find common ground.

The Zapatistas of Southern Mexico, Chiapas, found in this form of practice a structure of intra-community negotiations which efficiently moulded rebellious communities as spaces of re-invented emancipatory politics (De Angelis & Stavrides 2010). On a different level, dispersion characterized the relations between different squares in different neighbourhoods and different cities. The corresponding occupations exchanged ideas, and knowledge, they organized similar discussions in their assemblies and invited members of different occupied square movements to comment upon their experiences and think about their mistakes. Even though some demanded a "high level of coordination", coordination was always loose and open to differences of priorities. The occupied squares movements both at a national and at an international level never projected a grand synthesis of their forces and their plans. Nevertheless, recognizing common means and aspirations was a very powerful source of inspiration and solidarity.

2. Commoning and processes of subjectivation

One could explain this process in various ways: as a network of practices, a swarm of actors, or a confluence of initiatives. It might be argued that in different phases of the occupied squares movement, loose coordination and exchanges took forms that matched these models. We should not forget, however, that practices were not simply declared or planned but were performed and thus acquired their meaning while being performed. If we want to understand what "community in movement" means we must observe its emergence in these performances, which are full of ambiguities and discontinuities.

The occupied squares movements were characterized from the beginning by multiplicity, diversity and differentiation. By applying methods of anthropological observation we can attempt to capture this multiplicity either by reducing it to a typology of actions and practices or to a typology of performed and performative discourses. True, anthropology can help us in understanding the occupied squares movement by focusing on performances rather than on deduced ideologies. We need however something more: theories that are able to acknowledge and interpret new processes of collective subjectivation. An anthropological account can indicate how people in the squares acted in common on various levels and that they also

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produced forms of "common". This account can also document actions which reveal relations between people in the form of emergent micro-communities. Political theories can provide us with the means to understand the "figures", the subjects of these actions, and the processes which form them as potential or actual subjects of political actions.

John Holloway, Michael Hardt and Toni Negri and Jacques Rancière seem to share in their theorizations on political subjectivation a common horizon: subjects of political action emerge today by upsetting, threatening, or even dismantling dominant social taxonomies and the corresponding established social identities. Political subjectivation is characterized thus by the rise of new collective subjects which are inherently multiple and which escape from the dominant classifications of political action. It is not, I believe, that these theories interpret society as evolving into a chaotic agglomerate of temporary and interchangeable social identities, as some postmodern theories that celebrate "difference" would have it. In different ways the three theoretical approaches seem to propose a potential, emergent or, perhaps, already strong shattering of the processes that create political subjects. All three also explicitly deny that these subjects are the bearers of established identities. In fact, rethinking politics according to these theories means rethinking the mechanisms of identity formation as mechanisms of domination. "We are the 99%" said the occupiers of Wall Street. "We came from nowhere. You didn't expect us" said the *indignados* of Barcelona. "We are nobody" was written on an unsigned placard in Syntagma. "Anonymous" was a word used by many to describe themselves as well as others who participate in similar actions throughout the world. And obviously, no one has missed the symbolic importance the "anonymous" mask (taken from the V for Vendetta film) has acquired worldwide as an emblem of these movements. This mask was not simply circulated as a recognizable emblem of the "many". Actual, real people wore this mask not to hide in anonymity but, perhaps as a gesture of revealing a shared "non-identity", a shared escape from dominant identifications (Stavrides 2010: 121).

Holloway explicitly declares that, "identity is an illusion really generated by the struggle [of dominant capitalist power] to identify the non-identical. We, the non-identical, fight against this identification" (Holloway 2002: 100). Identification for Holloway is a process which ensures the reproduction of capitalist social relations. Identification then can be understood as a process of establishing and maintaining fixed identities both at the level of social relations but also at the level of resistance to those imposed social roles. A taxonomy of forms of resistance and an identification of their subjects are, according to Holloway, necessary preconditions for their neutralization and subsequent recuperation (Holloway 2010: 115).

With the square occupations a peculiar "we" surfaced that seems to elude the dominant classifications of "political subjects". This was not always the result of a deliberate and organized struggle against identifications. However, and reflecting the shared common ground of the three aforementioned theoretical approaches, the emergence of this unidentified "we" was the outcome of an objective potentiality of current capitalist society. In this, Hardt and Negri are more specific. What they name as the multitude is a vast network of dispersed individual and collective producers upon which contemporary capitalist production is dependent. They specifically describe a

biopolitical turn of the economy. Living beings as fixed capital are at the center of this transformation, and the production of forms of life is becoming the basis of added value (Hardt & Negri 2009: 132).

The multitude is a social condition, a network of social relations, and, at the same time, a potential political subjectivity. Inherent in the social conditions of biopolitical production, which captures and encloses the common produced by the networks of cooperation and interaction that permeate the multitude, is the possibility of collective emancipation. The multitude can turn itself into an emerging network of political subjects as long as producers attempt to re-appropriate the common they co-produce. As Hardt and Negri see it, the necessary and plural production of subjectivities (Ibid: 45) is an inherent characteristic of this network.

In different but compatible ways Holloway and Hardt and Negri anticipate and describe a diffusion of the potentiality of actions which transgress the limits of capitalist reproduction. Holloway's many "nos" and "cracks" and Hardt and Negri's "kaleidoscope" of singularities (Ibid: 112) point towards a necessary multiplicity of political subjects and actions. Multiplicity and heterogeneity are thus not considered as detriment to a potential emancipatory struggle but, on the contrary, both its precondition and objective potential and its welcomed outcome.

By insisting on the use of the term "singularity" in place of the term "identity" Hardt and Negri perhaps better capture the process of potential liberation from the dominant taxonomies (Hardt & Negri, 2009: 338-339 and 2005: 206). Identities exist and are reproduced due to an overarching taxonomic process which defines their place in a hierarchy of relations (social and political relations included). Singularities are inherently and potentially multiple because they are formed through actual relations established between them, relations which are repeatedly performed and influence those who perform them. Singularities are not dispersed and incompatible monads but are emergent and open to transformation nodes in networks of cooperation and interaction.

When describing the process of "individuation" that characterizes the multitude as a "network of individuals", Paolo Virno insists that we should "consider these singularities as a point of arrival, not as a starting point" (Virno, 2004: 76). It is perhaps this kind of heterogeneity that characterized the occupied squares movement. People who participated could not be identified with a specific part of society and, what is more, their actions and words often extended the limits imposed by their social identities. Commoning, i.e. practices of sharing and cooperation, created an overflowing from pre-existing identities and a confluence of different actions and refusals. A doctor participating in a voluntary medical centre in the square, a journalist of the multi-media Syntagma team, an unemployed worker offering his or her skills for the construction of the tent city, a student away from school but organizing discussions on the meaning of education, all those and so many other figures were exceeding the limits of their identities by performing acts "in-against-and-beyond" (Holloway, 2002) dominant taxonomies.

Rancière's ideas can complement such an understanding of the potential and transformative plurality of emergent political subjects. "The political process of subjectivation […] continually creates 'newcomers' new subjects that enact the equal power of anyone and everyone […]" (Rancière 2010: 59). The idea of "newcomers" adds to the crisis and the unsettling of dominant taxonomies a new crucial element. Politics for Rancière can only exist as long as there is a continuous

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demand and practice for equality. Newcomers are those who were "unaccounted for".

> The essence of politics consists in disturbing this arrangement [the matching of functions, places and ways of being which he calls the police-principle], by supplementing it with a part of those without part, identified with the whole of the community (Ibid 36).

Newcomers perform and embody this supplement to existing social order which upsets it and potentially delegitimizes it. Newcomers thus remake the community as they open it to the transformative power of equalitarian inclusion. Women in the Tahrir square during the Egyptian Arab Spring were definitely newcomers as they were by their presence and actions redefining the limits of political action, the limits of political subjectivation. In the squares many people who could not find their dreams and needs, included in the existing party or syndicate programs found, says to be "added" to those who are "accounted for". What sometimes appeared as an Anonymous crowd was in reality comprised of many unaccounted singularities, people and groups who had no opportunity to develop a distinct voice and to demand unclassified demands.

If we reformulate Rancière's thesis, we can perhaps capture the full spectrum of actual or potential political subjectivities which emerged during the square occupations. We can say that almost all were newcomers in some way or another. Even those who were sure about their political identities, as long as they immersed themselves in the fertile multiplicity of Syntagma square, they opened those identities to mutual exchanges. Newcomers were all those who lost the boundaries of their identities, who became open to new forms of cooperation, exchange and interaction. We can possibly add to the characteristics of newcomers a process of becoming open to identity negotiations. Newcomers, in this prospect, remind us of the potentialities inscribed in those "luminal figures" anthropologists have discovered in various "rites of passage" throughout the world. According to Victor Turner's classic definition,

> Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial (Turner, 1977: 95).

Interestingly, Turner believes that during the period of transition from one social status to another (from childhood to adulthood), neophytes experience a kind of temporary social bond between each other, "communitas", which creates a community of equals. Communitas represents an intermediary period of passage, a threshold period between two periods in which a structure of differentiated social roles prevails (Ibid. 116). We possibly see some analogies between the social order described by Turner and Rancière's "police" (understood as a rigid social taxonomy) as well as a correspondence between communitas and democratic community. It is not of course wise to jump to easy generalizations, as between the anthropology of rites of passage and contemporary society's political theories a lot of differences exist. It seems however that Rancière's newcomers enter the field of politics indeed as liminal entities: "Political subjects exist in the interval between different identities" (Rancière 2010: 56 and 2009: 59). Exactly like the liminal figures, newcomers emerge as subjects in the process of upsetting taxonomies of typical political actions and stances. Because newcomers were unaccounted for, there is no position ready for them. They claim a position by creating and

occupying the interstices between positions, thus causing explosive and revealing comparisons.[1]

"Neophytes" in anthropological theory, are experiencing in-between identities in the prospect of becoming acquainted with their future roles. Turner has insisted that this liminal initiation period is full of potentialities: societies are afraid of the powers unleashed in the experience of "communitas" and that is why they attempt to control it ritually. Is it perhaps that newcomers actually insert the exploring potentiality of their threshold status to the dominant taxonomies? And is it perhaps that the struggle against identification (Holloway 2002: 100) or the struggle to abolish identity (Hardt & Negri 2009: 332) is a struggle to bring to existence relational experiences of identification in which "identities" are open and always in-between assigned roles and predictable behaviour patterns?

3. Threshold spaces of communing

Liminality seems to have left its mark on the spatial forms employed by the occupied squares movement. The micro-squares in Syntagma square created by emergent micro- communities were not spatial enclaves defined by the boundaries of a situated shared identity. These micro-squares acquired the characteristics of an urban threshold. Like a threshold, they connected while separating and separated while connecting, to paraphrase Georg Simmell's brilliant formulation (Simmel 1997: 69).

This peculiar fusion of connectedness and separation describes very well both the experience of threshold spaces and their symbolic character. Thresholds do not simply define and enclose those who use them. Micro-squares were rather spaces in the making because they acquired their characteristics by intervening, by mediating between already existing areas of public space. Micro-squares, thus, did not simply emerge as spaces of radical otherness, barricaded against a prevailing normality of controlled *publicness*. They rather introduced new qualities to an important public square by creating spatial discontinuities that managed to upset customary uses of space from within. Routine everyday uses of the square coexisted with experimental uses belonging to a sought for different public culture. The result was more like an osmosis affecting both experiments and routines.

Threshold spaces, wavering between familiarity and surprise, were the continually shifting locus of this emergent osmotic culture. Moreover, threshold spaces actually symbolized the potentialities of osmosis. By really existing, and, at the same time, gesturing towards aspirations of equality and mutual help, micro-squares were opening holes in the continuity of time and place, thus provoking sudden illuminating comparisons between past and present, between normality and possibility. Walter Benjamin (1999a: 419), who considered such comparisons as necessary for a potential illuminating rediscovery of the city by the *flâneur* (the connoiseur of thresholds; see Benjamin 1999b), finds in the etymology of the word threshold a kind of pregnant potentiality: "A Schwelle <threshold> is a zone. Transformation, passage, wave action are in the word schwellen, swell" (Benjamin 1999: 494). Even if this etymology is highly debatable, micro-square thresholds, experienced as in-between spaces and times in which different forms of social life flicker, could indeed be represented as sudden spatiotemporal swells which produce unexpected discontinuities in the prevailing experience of public space routine uses.

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[1] As in the case of Rosa Parks, the black woman who refused to abandon her seat at the back of a bus in the racist USA South, thus directly contributing to the rise of the anti-racist civil rights movement; see Rancière (2009: 61).

Porosity of boundaries is the key characteristic of such threshold spaces. Open as they are to the transformative power of newcomers, threshold spaces are not defined by protocols of use and do not define types of users – inhabitants. Spatial in-betweeness corresponds to the characteristics of the emerging political subjectivities. Escaping dominant taxonomies, threshold micro-square spaces are relational, as singularities opposed to identities are. Relationality gives them their distinct character which is actually a character-process, a character-in-the-making. Threshold spatiality becomes thus the channelling and activating force of experiences which give form to the emergent and often precarious subjectivation process.

> The wisdom hidden in the threshold experience lies in the awareness that otherness can only be approached by opening the borders of identity, forming […] intermediary zones of doubt, ambivalence, hybridity, zones of negotiable values (Stavrides 2010: 18).

Syntagma Square became something like a dense network of threshold spaces, smaller and larger ones, short lived, instantaneous or more long lasting. The area of the common assembly itself was indeed a porous space, constituted by the people's bodies and arranged by the common will to speak, to hear and to devise ways of agreement. This space was created everyday anew and vanished when the assembly ended. Anybody could enter this space, anybody could address the assembly.[2]

Spatial multiplicity therefore was not a random or chaotic and orderless multiplicity. Explicit and implicit negotiations developed a growing network of spatial relations regulated by mutual respect and sustained by mutually agreed upon rules of space maintenance. Threshold spatiality was the hidden principle of spatial organization in Syntagma Square. This spatial organization could express and strengthen the dialectics of de-centralization and re-centralization mentioned above. A miniature "city of thresholds" always in the making, appeared in the squares. Its form had perhaps more clear characteristics in occupations which had the time to "secrete", so to speak their own space, like the Occupy movement squares in USA (Chomsky 2012, Blumenkranz *et. al.* 2011; Van Gelder 2011) or the Syntagma (Giovanopoulos & Mitropoulos 2011) and Madrid square occupations (Abellán *et.al.* 2012). But even in the brutally suppressed demonstrations-occupations of Tahrir square in Cairo and Habib Bourguiba Avenue in Tunis, people managed to temporarily create public spaces open to all: porous spaces that were welcoming to everyone (Alexander 2011).

A closer look at the Tahrir square occupation can perhaps reveal how important it was for the movement to protect the area of the square as a common space open to all. Certainly, the organized attacks of the police and Mubarak's thugs forced people to fight and to protect themselves by erecting barricades, guarding control points at the six entrances of the square and bravely keeping "the front lines of fighting next to the Egyptian museum" (Abul-Magd 2012: 566). But all these actions did not produce the image of a liberated stronghold to be defended against the attacks of Mubarak's forces.

As the battle of Kasr el-Nil bridge shows – a heroic (and ultimately victorious) battle against heavily armed police forces that had blocked access to the square – it was the regime that attempted to cut off Tahrir space from the rest of the

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[2] Although lots were drawn to select the speakers as there were many more requests to speak than the assembly's time could include.

city by converting it to a forbidden "public space" enclave. People struggled hard to keep the access to the square open and to inhabit the area as a shared space. Thus, "Tahrir had become a living and breathing microcosm of a civil sphere, the idealized world of dignity, equality and expanded solidarity" (Alexander 2011: 56). As a broadcaster from Al Jazeera commented "the square has become a mini-utopia in central Cairo. Political opinions aired, gender and sectarian discussions nowhere to be found" (Ibid). This kind of inclusive atmosphere allowed for the practices of commoning to create a multifarious sociality of free services and mutual support (including the offering of hot meals prepared in a collective kitchen, a medical centre, organized security and checkpoint controls, working groups of artists etc.). As in the case of Syntagma square occupation, even the collection of garbage by organized volunteers shows how space was transformed to common rather than public. As a participant said to New York Times: "I am cleaning because this is my home…. I feel like I have planted a tree. Now I need to look after it" (20 February 2011, quoted in Alexander 2011: 58). In the effervescence following the fall of Mubarak or in the alternative everydayness of the Syntagma tent city, public space was re-appropriated, re-created and re-invented in the form of "common space", shared space which did not have the authorization stamp of a dominant authority (Stavrides 2011: 13-14).

> Can indeed the city of thresholds become the spatial equivalent of an emancipating project based on the negotiation between different but open identities in the process of collectively inventing the future? (Stavrides 2010: 20).

Recent square occupations have opened a potentially new phase in the history of dissident politics. Observing them as open processes, rather than as types of political events already contained in recognizable taxonomies of political action, we can discover in them emergent potentialities as well as ambiguities and contradictions. What seems to be the most inspiring and innovating element of those processes was that they gave form to subjectivities oriented towards multiplicity, cooperation and inventive forms of coordination. A common feeling of indignation should and has been a propelling force. A common orientation towards justice and equality has also been a shared aspiration. However it was not through ideological agreements that the squares acquired their motivating and inspiring power. It was through shared practices of "commoning" that people had the chance to take parts of their lives into their hands and to project a criticism to prevailing exploitation and unjustness. People were angry on the squares, and people expressed their common anger sometimes through symbolic violence (ridiculing power in many ways) and sometimes through physical violence too (mostly protecting themselves from aggressive brutal police and army forces). People were however also very creative. Examples ranged from the protection measures demonstrators devised in the squares of Arab Spring to the carnivalesque performances of anger and joy in most occupied squares, from the myriad acts aimed at organizing an equalitarian everydayness in the tent cities to the expanding networks of invented threshold spaces. This collective creativity often echoed Holloway's call to "release the power of doing" (Holloway 2010).

Ordinary people, "anybody whoever" (Rancière 2010: 60), anonymous "singularities" (Hardt & Negri 2009) performed in the squares practices of de facto "communizing" (Hardt & Holloway 2011). This is how communities were re-invented in the squares; this is how collective action has overflowed from the boundaries of centralized organization, by combining many initiatives through the

de-centralization–re-centralization dialectics. It is not by chance that in the occupied squares movement democracy became an issue again. It did not simply become a topic for endless discussions but a force that enabled people to re-discover commonality, cooperation, solidarity, the power of the many. "Real" or "direct" democracy, thus, meant not the right to vote, not even the right to form and express an opinion, but a process of commoning that constantly prevents any accumulation of power. In the squares, the possibility of different forms of social life, explored by people emancipated from an unjust and destructive social system, was tested in inventive ways. Emerging political subjectivities, multiple and multiply related, escaped dominant taxonomies. Is this a new chance to re-think collective emancipation? Is this a new chance to perform equalitarian democracy?

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