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Non-representationist, Presentist Democracy

Isabell Lorey

Translated by Aileen Derieg

The young protest is most welcome. The many national and increasingly transnational protest movements of 2011 meet with much sympathy, especially when they are 'non-violent'. At last there is a collective uprising against the political, economic and social developments in financial market capitalism, the untenable precarious living and working conditions in neoliberalism, against the many governments that now only appear to serve capital and make decisions that are no longer in the sense of the majority of voters. Yet these protests, where primarily the 'young generation' is perceived in international media reception, are irritating at the same time. It is not clear enough what, exactly, they are protesting against in the streets and what they want instead. They are regarded as naive and uncoordinated, because they make no concrete demands, do not see themselves represented by political parties, and even dispense with speakers of their own. They do not fit in the hegemonic parameters of what is considered politics, struggles and political agency. The reduced perception that it is the young people who are rebelling, is a familiar pattern for infantalizing and depoliticizing protests, in a sense, which are not immediately to be classified, in order to avoid having to question

one's own naturalized categorizations of what can be effective, society-changing/revolutionary political agency.

'You do not represent us' is one of the slogans that could be heard in the Puerta del Sol in Madrid, Spain, and read on banners in May and June of this year. Those who do not represent, meant not only the elected social-democratic government, but also the oppositional conservative party. Both parties and government were denied the capability of representation. Similar attacks on elected and electable democratic representatives could also be heard and seen in Greece and Portugal. These movements of the precarious, called the 'outraged' from Spain to Greece after the best-seller by Stéphane Hessel, relate to the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt and concatenate again and again with the slogan 'Real Democracy now'.[1]

Democracy yes, representation no – that is nothing new, it could be objected; once again it is a matter of the traditional contrast between representative democracy on the one side and grassroots or direct democracy on the other. But there is more to it: it is a matter of collective political practices, which in 2011 are testing forms of non-representationist democracy in the Europe of representative democracy to an unusually great extent. Non-representationist practices are not a wholly new invention, they have historical genealogies, not only in anarchism, but also in the Zapatist movement of the 1990s, and the anti-globalization and EuroMayDay movement of the 2000s. Yet the current protests of the precarious go far beyond the leftist social-critical spectrum. And what was already becoming evident in the EuroMayDay movement is that it is not by chance that the precarious of postfordism reject political representation.

Three traditional modes of representation can be distinguished, which are rejected more or less explicitly by the protest movements of the precarious: 1. current manifestations of representative democracy (government, parties and participative pacification through elections), 2. representation as speaking on behalf of others by intellectuals and speakers, who present the concerns of the protesters suitably for the media and can function as contacts for governments, and 3. forms of organisation that form a unified 'we', an identitarian collective subject. The rejection of all three forms of representation is in keeping with political practices from earlier social and political movements. Positions were formulated again and again in the MayDay movement, for example, that an unified identity of the precarious is not possible, but what they have in common must first be found and invented in debates, alliances and in the struggles themselves. Possibilities of new non-identitary forms of 'organising the un-organisable'[2] are still being discussed and tried out up to the present. For the rejection of representative speakers, identitary organizing and representative democracy, continuities can be found in past struggles and movements, but not for the unequivocally positive reference to democracy in the name of the Spanish movement, '¡Democracia Real YA!'. Traditional forms of representation and 'real' democracy appear to be an oxymoron in the current protests of the precarious.

Assembly With or Without Representation

Debates about representation and democracy have been permeated since the eighteenth century by a recurrent topos: that of the relation between crowd and assembly. Western political philosophy considers the ideal for the self-government of the so-called populace to be the practice familiar from Greek or Roman antiquity: the free citizens of a city or an empire – the so-called

populus or *demos* – assemble in the marketplace, debate and decide about common concerns. However, as arguments arose in the eighteenth century about the actualization of this civic form of domination, doubts about the feasibility of a 'direct' or 'absolute' democracy for larger state formations prevailed. The proponents of this strand of the debate – such as Locke and Montesquieu – therefore argued in favour of political representation through parliament and representatives. The contrary strand argued for the physical presence of the entire citizenry as the basis for law-giving power. Jean-Jacques Rousseau stands for the latter position, moved in his *Social Contract* to hold an unequivocal counter-speech to the argument of the presumed necessity of political representation that is still upheld today.

'[...] the Sovereign cannot act save when the people is assembled,' writes Rousseau (1762: III 12), because solely the general will of the 'people' (*la volonté générale*) is sovereign. No elected government, no representative and no civil servant can act in the place of the assembled. 'Sovereignty [...] cannot be represented.' (ibid.: III 15) In his rejection of political-juridical representation, Rousseau is even moved to the radical statement: '[...] the moment a people allows itself to be represented, it is no longer free: it no longer exists.' (ibid.)[3] A people that would govern itself and directly, on the other hand, without ever misusing governmental powers, 'would not need to be governed' (ibid.: III 4). Good self-government makes government (by others) superfluous. Yet Rousseau is a sceptic, writing that 'there never has been a real democracy, and there never will be' (ibid.). Rousseau's criticism of representation clearly reached no hegemonic position; instead the triumph of democracy in the 'West' was conversely based substantially on being interwoven with political representation.

Representation contra Democracy

In contemporary political theory, Jacques Rancière is certainly the one who most clearly highlights the contradiction between democracy and representation. Genealogical traces of Rousseau's criticism of representation can be found in some aspects, but Rancière does not take up the unified idea of 'the people' as sovereignty of the people and has no particular interest in the self-legislation of the *demos* as constitutive power. On the contrary, Rousseau's sovereignty of the people is also an example for the exclusion of the 'part of those who have no part', such as women and all who are not counted as citizens. For Rancière, democracy is 'not a political regime' (2010: 31) and the question that is raised is less the question of assembly, but rather the question of dissensus. It is not the person who assembles with others that belongs to the *demos*, but rather 'the one who speaks when s/he is not to speak, the one who part-takes in what s/he has no part in' (2010: 32).

Rancière calls representative democracy an 'oxymoron' (2006), a rhetorical figure of mutually exclusive terms. In the meantime, however, representative democracy has come to be taken for granted as an international consensus; it is considered the best *possible* form for governing large states and corresponds formally to 'good governance'. But it was well known even in Rousseau's time and that of the two revolutions that democracy is the opposite of representation. Yet it was this contradiction that the Founding Fathers considered as 'precisely the means for the elite to exercise power *de facto*, and to do so in the name of the people that representation is obliged to recognize [...]' (ibid.: 53). Neither political representation nor elections are fundamentally democratic forms. Universal suffrage is the result of struggles, and the parliamentary form of governing, including the rule of law, is by no

means the modern key of democracy, in order to rule the masses (ibid.: 54). In the contrast between representation and democracy, Rancière is not interested in advocating for direct democracy as referendum or citizens' initiative, for in this form of democracy it is never really about an assembly of everyone either (ibid.: 52). The question that must be raised instead is, who votes and who is represented? If only a few are eligible to vote, the citizens can accordingly be more easily assembled. Historically, these kinds of direct assemblies of all citizens were only a gathering of property owners. A direct election still says nothing about the existence of a 'democratic government in the proper sense,' according to Rancière, as it is still always the minority that governs the majority (ibid.).[4]

The Division of the People

One of the fundamental theses of Rancière's thinking is that, especially in the existing forms of representative democracy, the 'people' is always divided. '[P]olitical practices [...] are always practices of dividing the people, of constituting a people that supplements the one that is inscribed in constitutions, represented by parliamentarians, and embodied in the State.' (ibid.: 76) The 'additional people' refers to the paradox between two regimes, which merges in the term 'democracy', and which constitutes politics. This paradox asserts the government of the people on the one hand, but at the same time denies them the competence to govern, because 'the government of anyone and everyone' (ibid.: 55) is considered impossible. On the other hand 'this or that oligarchy' (Rancière 2011: 151) governs, but less in the name of this "anyone and everyone", these many, but rather in the name of a kind of imaginary community. In the obscuring of this paradox of democracy, to which political philosophy contributes, according to

Rancière, the 'anarchic pillar of politics', namely the capabilities of this anyone and everyone, is negated, specifically the capabilities of assembling and leading that do not correspond to representationist logic (ibid.).

For Rancière democracy means an 'anarchic "government", one based on nothing other than the absence of every title to govern' (2006: 41). Those can be designated as 'anarchic', who 'have no more title for governing than they have for being governed' (ibid.: 46). This 'real democracy' (ibid.: 54) therefore is anarchic, because the desire to govern is lacking; this means it is based on the principle of chance and is thus not to be distinguished from the drawing of lots (ibid.: 41-49). Or conversely, the 'law of chance' means democracy. Only the drawing of lots offers the possibility that those govern, who do not want to govern. Only contingency as the foundation guarantees open opportunities and potentialities. A form of democracy like this occurs when a breach of the existing order results in enlarging the public sphere (ibid.: 55). To ensure that this movement of the political occurs as rarely as possible, any government tends 'to shrink this public sphere, making it into its own private affair and, in so doing, relegating the inventions and sites of intervention of non-State actors to the private domain.' Democracy therefore does not mean any private happiness or a form of life of individuals, but rather the opposite, 'a process of struggle against this privatization', against the taming and domesticating 'distribution of the public and the private' (ibid.).

Rancière posits an antagonistic relation between political representation and 'real' democracy, which corresponds to his distinction between a logic of policing and a logic of politics. The policing, representative logic divides the community, the people, hierarchizes them, constitutes itself through inequality and

distributes parts, competences and functions. Contrary to this, proper politics is the 'activity' that repeatedly 'adds' to police order what it seeks to domesticate on the one hand and what at the same time challenges and 'dissolves' it in conflict. Rancière calls this activity the 'power of the equality of anyone and everyone' (2011: 153). Those who are not represented and are therefore also arbitrary, because they have no name, are consequently equals, their articulations – always in conflict with the 'police' – signify politics. Their equality arises solely in relation to the inequality of the police order, which keeps them at a distance and denies them their capabilities. Their namelessness seems to be an effect of non-representation; the negation of police representation produces democratic equality in arbitrariness. In light of this complementary composition, the question arises here of whether a democratic politics, an an-archy of political agency can be envisioned within the body of Rancière's theory, which does not relate primarily to the representationist police order, even though it constantly challenges it.

Non-representationist, Presentist Democracy

I think it is evident how apt Rancière's ideas are for theoretising the oxymoron between representation and democracy in the current movements of the outraged. What is lost in Rancière's reflections, however, is the old topos of the relation between crowd and assembly, which is now being actualized in a new way, not only in the central European squares. The assembly is the fundamental practice of the protests, it means organising and instituting.

When I speak of practices of non-representationist democracy for the current protest movements, this does not designate a negation of representation in general, but rather political practices that

understand themselves as democratic beyond traditional logics of political representation – like the ¡Democracia Real YA!-movement in Spain or the movement of the outraged in Syntagma Square in Athens.

They speak of democracy, assemble and camp. All the infrastructure needed for living together with many others in a square for days and weeks, for eating, washing, going to the toilet, receiving medical care, protection and also working, together with the countless offers of information and advice and the central regular assemblies, are all practices of self-organisation that are not to be separated from the form of democracy that is at the core.

It is designated in the name ¡Democracia Real YA!. This democracy is real, less in the sense of being the only true, right democracy, but rather in conjunction with 'ya', taking place actually and materially at this moment, especially in the practice of the assemblies of the *acampadas* and all those who want to participate. This is not so much a direct democracy, in which the citizens are involved in all the political decisions, but rather a new understanding of democracy, not *à venir*, but rather *in actu*, an understanding of democracy that I would like to call *presentist democracy*.

'Presentist' refers to a present becoming, to an extended, intensive present. Presentist democracy is the opposite of representative democracy, a democracy that is based on an absent presence and that asserts bringing to mind those necessarily absent, just as it inevitably leads to a part of those who have no part, to the division of the 'people', as Rancière says. The other, new form of democracy that is practised in the moment of the assembly in actively becoming presentist is not a non-political form of living. It is a mode of the political subjectivation of all who want to participate

in it. It is not concerned with the unavoidable exclusions through representation, but operates radically inclusively. In the moment of the assembly, presentist democracy becomes a constituent power beyond the idea of the sovereignty of the people; the 'people' proves to be a multitude, the crowd that cannot be bound, tamed and standardised by representation (cf. Lorey 2011a). It is not a matter of an assembly of the nation, but rather of many squares, camps and places of coming together. Each of the communal assemblies in Spain operates independently and decentrally. In some assemblies there are discussions about the necessity of developing concrete objectives and demands, but at the same time a process also crystallises in many places that is constantly changing and spreading, a process of presentist democracy. This is not really a matter of the power of decision in the sense of sovereignty and legislation. Nevertheless, there are rules for living together camping and for the assemblies. Again and again, the press has mentioned with irritation the absence of trash and chaos in the camps.

Presentist democracy in Athens is even explicitly aleatoric: the system of drawing lots for speaking was introduced for the assemblies in Syntagma Square. Those who wanted to speak in the daily assemblies could draw a number and wait for the results of the random drawing. This contingency of speaking by lots replaces representatives and emphasizes that this practice of presentist democracy has no claim to government. The aim is not the government, neither in taking power nor as an opponent in a confrontation with the constituent power of the assembled precarious. Aimless in this sense, the lots radically show the starting point of equality in the movement. It is remarkable that those most extremely confronted with contingency, the precarious, choose as democracy the practice of the radical contingency of

equals, inventing the possibilities of the future in the assemblies together.

The multitude of the precarious exchange ideas, talk together about common concerns in the context of the present political-economic situation, enter into a process, in which aspects begin to crystallise, which they not only have in common in all their differences due to government through insecurity, but at the same time also aspects of how a 'better society' could be built – the first proposed parameters can be read in the manifesto of ¡Democracia Real YA!.[5]

None of this takes place in a domination-free space, neither among one another nor beyond. The respective national and local governments that felt challenged in the logic of what they fear most in domestic politics, namely insurrection, reacted with brutal police operations against the assembled, not only in Barcelona and Athens.[6]

Not only in this kind of physically repressive logic, but also in a complementary discursive logic, it is an argument often heard even from leftist intellectuals that increasing precarization could threaten democracy. Especially in the face of insurrection, the hegemonic reflex is fear of destruction and anomie. If one takes a perspective like this, it is understandable why the protesters' tactic of 'non-violence' is irritating and why the new democratic practices of the precarious cannot be perceived (cf. Lorey 2011b).

The practices of presentist democracy break through the domination-functional opposition between dominant order and insurrection. When the precarious assemble in central squares and practice presentist democracy, they are carrying out an exodus from the dominant political-economic order, an exodus not into a

hereafter, but rather out of the hegemonic logic of representation, in order to expand and newly invent the space of the public and the political.

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[1] The protests in Israel, Chile and the US in turn referred to the ‘outraged’ in Spain and Greece.

[2] http://kulturrisse.at/ausgaben/042006

[3] Rousseau softened this radical position, however, in the publication *Considérations sur le gouvernement de Pologne*, published in 1772, ten years after the *Contrat social*.

[4] Rousseau also already pointed this out in the *Social Contract* (III 4).

[5] http://www.democraciarealya.es/manifiesto-comun/manifesto-english/

[6] In Rancière’s wording: The police intervention in public space as dissolution of the demonstrations of those who have no part.