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The Molecular Strike

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17 September 2011. A demonstration march through lower Manhattan chooses as the destination of its dérive a small park near the enormous construction site of the World Trade Center. Zuccotti Park is a formerly public, now privatized square belonging to the real estate corporation Brookfield Properties, named after its chairman John Zuccotti. On older maps of the financial district, however, this square has a different name: Liberty Plaza. The demonstrators have not chosen to occupy this territory because of a universalist invocation of freedom, but rather because they want to set a further component of the abstract machine in motion that has drawn lines of flight throughout the entire year, especially through the Mediterranean region. And the most intensive line of this abstract machine was probably the Egyptian part of the Arab Spring with its center in Tahrir Square, the "Place of Freedom". By purposely occupying another place of freedom at the edge of Wall Street, the precarious occupiers seek not only to interrupt subservient deterritorialization, the flows through the global financial center, but they also take up the practices, with which current activisms de- and re-territorialize their times, their socialities, their lives in new ways.

In his last course with the title "The Courage of Truth"[1], Michel Foucault explored the scandalous life of the Cynics, to which he applied the colorful term of "philosophical activism"[2]. It was not his intention to attribute a privileged position to the activity of the philosophers, even less to reduce activism to a cognitive capacity. Rather, the Cynic philosopher served as a backdrop for a more general form of activism, of changing the world, of newly inventing worlds. For Foucault in later years, philosophical activism was an "activism in the world and against the world".

The Cynic philosopher is, first of all, the exemplary, anecdotal, almost mythical figure of Diogenes, with no permanent residence, at most a tub, living his life completely in public, scandalously all the way to masturbating in public, practicing *parrhesia*, the manner of "saying everything", even if it is associated with great risk, which in Cynicism conjoins the art of existence with the discourse of truth. Foucault's endeavor of a "history of life as possible beauty" situates this old Greek Cynicism as the pivotal point of a whole genealogy of scandalous, disobedient, self-forming forms of living. Foucault sees historical actualizations of Cynic activism in the minoritarian heretical movements of the Middle Ages, in the political revolutions of modernity, and – somewhat surprisingly – in the theme of the artist's life in the nineteenth century. And here I would add to the Foucaultian genealogy the new activisms of the twenty-first century: anti-globalization movement, social forums, anti-racist no border camps, queer-feminist activisms, transnational migrant strikes, Mayday movements of the precarious. Now since last year there has been a tremendous intensification of these new activisms in the wider Mediterranean region: from the waves of university occupations to the revolutions of the Arab Spring, all the way to the movements of occupying central squares in Greece, Spain and Israel. Day-long sit-ins at the Kasbah Square in Tunis,

revolutionary occupations of Tahrir Square in Cairo, Acampadas in the Puerta del Sol in Madrid, tents in the Rothschild Boulevard in Tel Aviv. Much could be said about what these new activisms have in common. They are all about appropriating real places, about a struggle against precarization, against extreme competition and against the drivenness of contemporary production, largely dispensing with representation and weaving a transnational concatenation of social movements. There are, however, three specific vectors, on which these activisms enter new territory: in their search for new forms of living, in their organizational forms of radical inclusion, and in their insistence on re-appropriating time.

1. Inventing new forms of living.

When Foucault brings art into play, following the revolutions in his genealogy of the Cynics, it is not classical aesthetics or an existentialist theory of art that concerns him, but rather art that is "capable of giving a form to existence which breaks with every other form"[3], a form that forms itself, newly invents itself, an "aesthetics of existence". Aesthetics as ethics, as the invention of new modes of subjectivation and of new forms of living (together), existence as aesthetic object, life as a beautiful work. This ethico-aesthetic aspect of forming life is by no means to be understood as an individualistic stylization of life: even though dandyism and existentialism certainly also belong to the genealogy of the aesthetics of existence, the term does not refer to an aesthetization of the artist's existence. Instead, Foucault's examples go in the direction of relationship, of exchange, and not in the direction of the pure and autonomous implementation of a self-relation. Forming life as living together takes place at the microphysical and the macrophysical level, in the forming of the individual body, in

the forming of social relations. In his lecture, Foucault explicitly says about this: “By basing the analysis of Cynicism on this theme of individualism, however, we are in danger of missing what from my point of view is one [of its] fundamental dimensions, that is to say, the problem, which is at the core of Cynicism, of establishing a relationship between forms of existence and manifestation of the truth.”[4] Philosophical activism is not about a model philosophical or artistic life beyond relations, at the edge of the world. Cynics live in the midst of the world, against the world, with the horizon of an other world; in Foucault’s words, they have “laid down this otherness of an *other* life, not simply as the choice of a different, happy, and sovereign life, but as the practice of an activism on the horizon of which is an *other* world”.[5]

This understanding of an other life enabling an other world applies all the more to the collective Cynicism, or rather: the molecular Cynicism of the new activisms today. In this kind of molecular Cynicism, it is not the individual philosopher, not the dandyesque artist, not the existentialist activist that is at the center, but rather the exchange relations of singularities testing disobedient, non-subservient, industrious forms of living.

If today’s revolutions are not only taken as molar, as – in a narrow sense - political projects, but rather also as molecular revolutions, then the aesthetics of existence takes its place alongside the political project as a “continual and constantly renewed work of giving form [to life]”[6], to living together. A contemporary concept of molecular revolution requires the ethico-aesthetic level of transforming forms of living into a beautiful and good life, as well as the becoming of forms of living together across continents: micro-machines, which in their singular situativity form disobedient modes of existence and subjectivation, develop arts of existence and life techniques, as well as translocally dispersed,

global abstract machines. The molecular revolution also comprises the "ethical revolution" that is called for at the end of the manifesto of the Spanish occupiers of M-15. The multitude that occupied the many main squares of Spain beginning on 15 May for several weeks is not particularly interested in gaining symbolic space and media attention. The occupiers take over the occupied squares, they appropriate them and make them their own, even though they know they are only there for a certain time. This time, however, is decisive, an extraordinarily important time of their lives, the time of assemblies and the social time of living together, of residing and sleeping in the occupied squares. Their new ethico-aesthetic paradigm seeks revolution in the forming of their own lives and of living together. The call for an ethical revolution is thus not at all a kind of first demand for different, better politicians, nor simply the obvious demand that corrupt politics should resign as a whole. Instead, it is a demand to themselves, a call for fundamental transformations, for the fabrication of non-subservient machinic modes of living, for disobedient industries, for non-conforming forms of living together.

2. Inventing new modes of organization.

When today's activisms turn against a one-sidedly molar procedure, this does not mean that they neglect aspects of organization and reterritorialization. Yet the streaking of time and space finds its own molecular procedures. Molecular modes of organization are not organic, but rather orgic-industrious, not centered around representation, but non-representationist, not hierarchically differentiating, but radically inclusive. Molecularity does not focus on taking over state power, but it takes effect in the pores of everyday life, in the molecules of forms of living. Molar organization arises as striating reterritorialization, it focuses

struggles on a main issue, a main contradiction, a master. In a molecular world of dispersion and multiplicity, a different form of reterritorialization is needed, inclusive and transversal, beyond individual or collective privileges. Transversality means that the movements of reterritorialization and deterritorialization do not pursue particular goals, they do not establish and secure privileges. Instead they smooth and streak territories by crossing through them. The special rights of every single singularity are diametrically opposed to all individual or collective privileges. Yet these special rights only exist where every singularity can fully live its own specialness, try out its own form of concatenation, streak its own time. There is no privileged position for the intellectuals, for art or activism. Molecular struggles are struggles that emerge incidentally and spread further through what is incidental to the incidentals. No master heads the molecular organization.

The Cynic philosopher is an anti-king. Philosophical activism is not practiced in the form of sects, communities, in the form of small numbers. Instead, there is no community at all in Cynicism; the Cynic form of philosophical activism is, according to Foucault, "in the open, as it were, that is to say, an activism addressed to absolutely everyone"[7]. This kind of openness evolves in the practice of the new molecular activisms. In the language of the activists it places radical inclusion at the center of assemblies, discussions and actions. An "activism addressed to absolutely everyone", and yet nevertheless not operating universalistically, but transversally, like the tent camp in the Rothschild Boulevard in Tel Aviv, for example, following which the largest demonstration for social justice in the history of Israel took place in early September 2011. Radical inclusion means here, most of all, establishing an open milieu, in which the right to a place to live is not only demanded for everyone, but also acted out straight away in protest.

The tent assemblages, the assemblies, the discussions are already living examples of the radical inclusion and transversality of the movement.

In the case of #occupy wallstreet, the tendency to radical inclusion is evident primarily in the invention and development of general assemblies. These are not so much "general assemblies" in the conventional sense, but rather transversal assemblages of singularities, which renew the grassroots-democratic experiences of the anti-globalization and social forums movement, further developing them into a form of polyvocality – for instance in the invention, almost by chance and out of necessity, of a new procedure of "amplification": because the police forbid them to use microphones, megaphones or other technical means, they began to repeat every single sentence from the speakers in chorus. The functionality of this repetition consists, first of all, in making the speech intelligible for hundreds of people in an open air setting. Yet the chorus as amplification here is neither a purely neutral medium of conveyance nor a euphoric affirmation of the speakers. It can happen that the chorus, whose voice is speaking the same thing, proves to be radically polyvocal and differentiated: one voice supports the speaker with hand signs, the next declares dissent with other hand signs, and the third has turned away from the speaker to better ensure the amplifying function for the others listening.

3. Industrious re-appropriation of time.

Just as the Cynic philosopher seeks scandal in the offensive transparency of his life, the new activisms speak clearly by taking the empty promise of "public space" at its word. This is the exercise, as widely visible as possible, of deviant modes of

subjectivation, not or not only in the nakedness, placelessness and promiscuity of the Cynics, but most of all in playing with the paradox of the public: public space does not exist, and most of all not in the smooth spaces of urban centers, whether they are the touristic non-places of the Puerta del Sol or the Rothschild Boulevard, whether it is the privatized sphere of Zuccotti Park, or whether it is the heavy traffic of Tahrir Square. And yet, or specifically because of this, the new activisms occupy the central squares, turn them into common-places, as a paradoxical provocation of normativity and normalization. And beyond this spatial re-territorialization, it is primarily the re-appropriation of time that marks the protestors' modes of action. In the midst of the nervous poly-rhythms of precarious life, in the midst of this mixture of drivenness and melancholy, they invent a surplus, in the midst of subservience they create a desire to not be taken into service in that way. In the midst of hurried timelessness, the precarious strikers insist on different time-relations, they streak the time in the patience of assemblies, in spreading out living, residing, sleeping in the squares, feeling their way to the first rudimentary possibilities of a new form of resistance, the molecular strike.

The occupiers take the space and time seriously that they set up, striate, streak, taking time for long, patient discussions and taking time to stay in this place, developing a new everyday life, even if only for a short time. In an otherwise boundless everyday life, the molecular strike spreads out these small new durations of everyday life. Its institution, however, first requires an evental break with subservient deterritorialization in machinic capitalism. The molecular strike is both: duration and break. It is not leaving, not dropping out of this world, no time-out. The molecular strike is the breach in the time regime of subservient deterritorialization that we drive in, in order to try out new ways of living, new forms

of organization, new time relations. No longer a struggle merely to reduce working time, but rather for an entirely new streaking of time as a whole. In machinic capitalism, it is a matter of the whole, the totality of time, its entire appropriation. The molecular strike struggles for its reappropriation, its streaking, piece by piece. The new Wobblies will be no Industrial Workers of the World, but rather Industrious Workers of the world, a gigantic industry carrying everything along with it, not submitting to subservient deterritorialization, at the same time a reterritorialization, an industrious refrain, a dangerous class that will no longer let its time be stolen.

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[1] Foucault, Michel, *The Courage of Truth*, trans. Graham Burchell, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011

[2] The original French term “militantisme” is translated in the English version of the course as “militancy”.

[3] Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, p. 187.

[4] Ibid., p. 284.

[5] Ibid., p. 287.

[6] Ibid., p. 162.

[7] Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, p. 284.