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REFLECTIONS ON A REVOLUTION

The Syntagma experiment: democracy from the bottom up

by Jérôme E. Roos on July 12, 2011



What we are witnessing here in Athens is a genuine experiment in democracy for and by the people — without representation, hierarchy or borders.

Syntagma Square, Tuesday July 12th

The sun sets on Athens, casting a dark glow on the seemingly impenetrable walls of Parliament. But as thousands of Greeks converge upon Syntagma for the 50th night in a row, it's yet another dawn for the popular uprising here.

The protest banners flow smoothly in the mild summer breeze as a timid young woman takes the microphone to address the popular assembly. She's reading from a scrappy little note in her shaking hands. Her voice is trembling and she shyly stumbles over her words. I have no idea what she is saying, but I am touched by the spectacle.

As I observe this fascinating ritual, I realize that there's so much more to this phenomenon than the content of what is being said. The words being spoken may be in a foreign language, but the emotions being conveyed are universal. Anxiety, alienation, anger — but also hope and a generalized hunger for change.

The popular assemblies usually take long. Starting at around 9pm they often continue well beyond midnight, until the live music starts again around 1 or 2am. I'm sure it can be a tedious experience if you actually understand the language. But the patience and respect on display here have long moved beyond such petty egotistical concerns.

At Syntagma, you don't need to be an eloquent rhetorician in order to flourish. The assemblies are about giving a voice to the discontented. Building a platform for the indignant. Working on solutions together. Even if it's tedious at times, this cooperative approach is the only way to truly make people feel involved in the political process.

What we are witnessing here in Athens — and in Madrid, Barcelona, Lisbon, Paris, and hundreds of other squares around the continent — is a genuine experiment in direct, participatory democracy. Democracy from the bottom up. Democracy for and by the people. Democracy without representation, hierarchy or borders.

From the outside, it's easy to criticize this approach for being idealistic — Utopian even. But in reality, the people gathered here are very well aware of the pitfalls and drawbacks of their participatory model. "At this pace," Konstantinos tells me, "this process is going to take 10 years."

"But," he adds hopefully, "if we succeed in decentralizing the movement and spreading the assemblies to the neighborhoods, we can truly build an inclusive democracy based on the local concerns of real people. We may even create a political party that will answer only to the decisions made by the popular assemblies. That's the idea."

Others shun the idea of setting up parliamentary representation altogether. For them, it's not just the politicians and parties that are corrupted, but the system as a whole. It is exactly because parliamentary democracy depends on the existence of a highly selective political class of expert policymakers that the masses feel alienated.

In fact, as I gaze over the square and onto Parliament, I realize that there's a deeply symbolic quality to this picture. The house of representatives, sitting some 20 meters above the square, somehow seems so far removed. The protest camp is

humbly set in the square below, almost as if to symbolize the yawning gap between the grassroots politics of the people and the police-cordoned ivory tower of those in power.

All of this makes the liberal parliamentary system look so archaic and out of place. Once upon a time, the bourgeois idea behind representative democracy was that the irrational *plebs* simply couldn't be trusted with the responsibility of governing themselves.

Surely a vote could be held every so often to provide at least the semblance of popular sovereignty, but the people calling the shots and making the tough decisions would still have to be like Plato's philosopher-kings — objectively removed from the petty concerns of the uneducated proletariat.

What's so fascinating for me to see as a political scientist, is the way in which the Syntagma camp — just like the Acampada del Sol that inspired it — breaks with this notion of the “political class” altogether. Indeed, Syntagma's main success so far has been to effectively provide a platform for the rapid politicization of segments of society that had previously been considered largely apathetic and apolitical.

Now you have high school students and working-class retirees sitting side-by-side, attentively listening to what each and every speaker has to say. Surely there is plenty of disagreement between them. But it's exactly because of the cooperative nature of the gatherings that people are united by the process, rather than divided by the politics.

This, in my view, is a revolution in its own right. Whether the government and/or austerity memorandum are overthrown or not, Greek society has — to my limited knowledge — never before seen such an incredible outburst of civic engagement. The parliamentary system simply took the incentive for political involvement away from the people.

What the Syntagma experiment has taught us so far is that if you *trust* the people to make decisions for themselves, they will actually do a pretty good job at it. Paradoxically, the only way to truly empower the individual is by embedding her within a larger collective.

Certainly, there are great problems and hurdles to be overcome. No one knows if this model can actually survive the crisis and continue to draw the same involvement even in times of relative peace and prosperity. But that's exactly why

Syntagma is such a fascinating experiment. It's an open air laboratory for political scientists and committed citizens alike.

As I'm rounding up this article, someone comes up to our table in the multimedia center to bring food to the hungry. I can't help but being reminded of Milton Friedman — the godfather of the neoliberal ideology that gave rise to this crisis — who once famously said that there is no such thing as a free lunch.

Once again, the committed citizens of Syntagma have proven him and his liberal ideologues wrong. If only we can learn to trust in the essential goodness of human nature, a better society will unfold itself right in front of our very eyes.

This report was made possible by the volunteers of the Syntagma kitchen, who just provided us with some delicious free feta.