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Costas Douzinas

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# Athens rising

**Costas Douzinas**

University of London, UK

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Urban space has always expressed the inequality of social relations and offered a site of conflict. Urban legality comprises planning, architectural and traffic regulations, public entertainment, protest and expression rules, and licit and illicit ways of being in public. It imposes a grid of regularity and legibility, ascribing places to legitimate activities while banning others, structuring the movement of people and vehicles across space, ordering encounters between strangers. Yet from the regular urban riots of early modernity to the civil rights movement, May 1968, or the Athens Polytechnic, the ‘street’ has confronted and unsettled urban legality and changed social systems, laws and institutions across epochs and places. The vote, the vote for women, basic laws to protect labour and stop discrimination, and many other entitlements, today taken for granted, were the result of street protests, insurrections and riots.

The ‘street’ and the ‘square’ have now returned to politics. Over the last 10 years, a persistent sequence of spontaneous protests, riots and insurrections has broken out all over the world. They include the Paris *banlieus* riots in 2005 and 2007, the Athens insurrection in December 2008, the Arab Spring, the Spanish *indignados* and the Greek *aganaktismenoi*, London August 2011 and the Occupy movements, amongst many others. Although the form of these protests is recognizable, their political force is located within an unprecedented socio-economic environment. I will focus on three types of resistance which have both something old and something new. I will illustrate them from the experience of recent events in Greece.

1. Athens December 2008. Within hours of the unprovoked police killing of the 15-year old

Alexis Grigoropoulos, a massive insurrection by young people broke out all over Greece. Some 800 secondary schools were occupied. Daily marches to police stations, Parliament and ministries were accompanied by a number of highly imaginative protests: sit-ins, street happenings, interruption of theatre performances and discussions with the audience, the raising of a banner calling for resistance on the Acropolis, the occupation of a state TV studio during a news broadcast and the iconic burning of a Christmas tree in Syntagma Square. Banks and luxury shops were attacked, some looting was reported and several cars and some buildings were burned, but there were no casualties. For 2 weeks central Athens was under the control of young people with the police keeping a distance. No party planned or led the insurrection, no specific demands were put forward, no single ideology dominated. Politicians and journalists dismissed the insurrection as non-political, as criminal and as blind violence. The similarities to London August 2011 are striking.

2. Athens, February 2011. While the Maghreb revolution was in full flow, 300 *sans papiers* immigrants from North Africa took refuge in the *Hepatia* building in central Athens and staged a hunger strike. They had lived and worked in Greece for up to 10 years, doing

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**Corresponding author:**

Costas Douzinas, Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities,  
Birkbeck College, University of London, Malet Street, London  
WC1E 7HX, UK.

Email: c.douzinas@bbk.ac.uk

the jobs the Greeks did not want to do for a fraction of the minimum wage without social security. When the crisis struck, they were unceremoniously kicked out. After 40 days, with several strikers in hospital with irreversible organ failure that would lead to death, the government accepted the bulk of their demands.

3. On 25 May 2011, a multitude of men and women of all ideologies, ages and occupations, including many unemployed, calling themselves the *aganaktismenoi*, started occupying Syntagma (Constitution) Square in Athens opposite the Parliament. The occupations in Spain and Greece were inspired by Tahrir Square and in turn inspired the worldwide Occupy movement. The Greek occupations were in opposition to the catastrophic austerity measures imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Union (EU) and welcomed by the Greek elites, which over 30 years had increased the deficit and debt. The daily occupations and rallies, sometimes involving up to 200,000 people, were initially peaceful. Political parties and banners were discouraged, no leaders and spokespersons emerged, and no statements were given to the press, except for the formal resolutions.

The parallels with the classical Athenian agora, which met a few hundred metres away, are striking. In daily assemblies, aspiring speakers were given a number and called to the platform if their number was drawn, a reminder that most office-holders in classical Athens were selected by lot. The speakers stuck to strict 2-minute slots to allow as many as possible to contribute. The topics ranged from organizational matters to economic and social alternatives and constitutional reform. In well-organized weekly debates, invited economists, lawyers and political philosophers presented alternatives for tackling the crisis. I was invited to address the assembly on 16 June. It was an amazing experience that changed my view of the world.

These relatively new forms of resistance appear regularly now. Their timing is unpredictable but their occurrence certain. Standard political science,

obsessed with the machinations of leaders, parties and governments, cannot explain these events and dismisses them as 'apolitical'. In an attempt to understand this return of resistance and 'street' politics, I will present briefly the economic and social landscape of late capitalism and its biopolitical implications, using Greece as an example.

### **Immaterial and biopolitical capitalism**

In postindustrial capitalism, immaterial production has largely replaced agriculture and industry. Whereas industrial capitalism turned the concrete into abstract, the product into commodity, in late capitalism thoughts, ideas and words become immediately material objects and products. Collective knowledge in all its forms, as language, communication, networking, ideas and signs, has become the main force of production. The general intellect is incorporated no longer in machines, but in the lives of working people. As a result, permanent work has been abolished. Part-time, flexible, alternate and piecework, and long periods of unemployment following short periods of work are now the rule. Also, profit takes two new forms: first, rent for services and interest for capital and, second, the difference between paid and unpaid work.

Working people are not paid for their continuous learning and re-skilling. Additionally, wages are pushed down brutally in order to improve competitiveness. In the past, a reserve army of unemployed was used precisely to reduce wages. Today, however, the use of technology and the transfer of industry to the developing world mean that a large number of people have become superfluous. They are the precariat, the unemployed and unemployable young and old people as well as the immigrants, refugees, the moving 'one-use humans' who drown in their thousands in the Mediterranean; the floating graveyard of Europe. Getting a wage, any wage, has become the hardest quest. People beg to be exploited.

The third change is the extensive and violent privatization of the remaining commons. The three facets of our social substance, the commons of culture, of external nature and of our own biological nature are systematically being sold off. We must

rent back from capital our common substance and our collective achievements.

In this context, technocrats replace politicians because governance allegedly needs scientific expertise and can be jeopardized by too much democracy. The recently appointed Prime Ministers of Italy and Greece are bankers, the people who created the problem are now asked to solve it. After the Greek elections of June 17 2012, a new politically-led government was created but the Minister of Economics is again a banker and the policies of the previous technocratic government continue. This closing down of representative politics is accompanied by a new arrangement of power. Biopolitics is the exercise of power on *bios*, life. It extends from the depths of consciousness to the bodies and souls of the population. Population control is supplemented by technologies that discipline and control individual selves. Biopolitical capitalism does not produce just commodities for subjects; it creates subjects. Material, social, affective, ethical and cognitive strategies are involved in this process. During periods of economic growth, working people were inserted directly into the economy through private and public debt and consumption. The indebted worker accepts the freedom of consumer choice and personal responsibility as the main criteria of success. Proliferating individual rights support socioeconomic integration. Every desire could become an entitlement, every 'I want X', 'I have a right to X'.

However, this atomization of the population is also the Achilles heel of late capitalism. The worker can withdraw abruptly and even violently from the escalating spiral of desire, satisfaction and frustration. If one of the links in the integration chain breaks, the overall psychological and ideological architecture collapses. This can happen through the sudden loss of a job, a major deterioration in the conditions of life or expectations, an attack on personal or national dignity, a frustration of desires or promises. It may erupt after an accumulation of humiliations or in response to an event that condenses a plethora of grievances, such as the killing of Alexis Grigoropoulos in Athens or Mark Duggan in London.

Greece is a textbook case of the complex entanglement of population control and the disciplining of the subject. After entry to the euro, the government

promoted consumption and hedonism as the main way of linking private interests with the common good. People were treated as desiring and consuming machines. Easy and cheap loans, bribing people to transfer their savings into stocks and shares, and an artificial increase of real estate values became the main instruments of economic growth. At the same time, debt-fuelled consumption was promoted as the criterion for individual happiness and social mobility. The 'obscene father', as psychoanalysis characterizes the power that insists on enjoyment, kept telling the Greeks 'enjoy', 'buy', 'live as if this is your last day'.

The recent austerity measures violently disarticulated this trend. The earlier prioritization of care for individual well-being and control of conduct over population management was reversed. At the collective level, they divide Greeks according to work, profession, age, gender and race, and demand radical behavioural changes for the sake of 'national salvation'. The politics of personal desire and enjoyment has turned into a strategy of saving the genetic information of the nation by abandoning its individual members. Greece is the laboratory where the future of Europe is tested under conditions of extreme hardship and popular militancy.

## New political subjects

This is the context in which the battle cry of resistance comes to the fore again. The spontaneous insurrections mark the point at which the complementarity and coupling of individual freedom with police repression and behavioural control unravels. The stake in this politics is the construction of new subjectivities; the site, the creation of a new political subject and the revival of democracy.

Our cases indicate the emergence of three resisting subjectivities: the expendable, redundant humans; the biopolitically excluded; and the democratically disenfranchised. The immigrants realized that minimum humanity is created through what they lacked, *papiers*, documents, files. In a biopolitical world, life is registered life; undocumented life is not recognized. To retrieve their life from this administrative void, they had to come to the threshold of death. In doing so, the *sans papiers* became

martyrs, both witnesses and sacrificial victims. They confirmed that human rights do not belong to humans. They construct a gradated humanity, between the fully human, the less human and the non-human.

The December 2008 insurrection of the supposedly apolitical youth was a reaction to the combination of rights with control and repression. The insurgents were people whose interests are never heard, accounted or represented. They did not demand anything specific. They simply said, 'enough is enough', 'here we stand against'. Not I claim this or that right, but I claim the 'right to have rights'. Being invisible, outside the established sense of what exists, speaks and is acceptable, people who exist socially but not politically must perform their existence through the absolute negation of what exists. Theirs was politics at degree zero, the first but insufficient step in the emergence of political subjectivity. Caught between the demands of insatiable desire and brutal repression, they performed the absolute and ineffective freedom of acting out. If will and necessity cannot be dialectically united, they remain opposed in a disjunctive synthesis. As we know, the link between two forces that cannot be synthesized is violence.

The mainstream media called the December protesters a 'rabble'. In Syntagma Square, the mob became a multitude. The reference to the rabble reminds us of two major divides in social theory. Social psychology from Le Bon and Freud to McDonald and Canetti has approached the crowd as a threatening, irrational mass or beast. The crowd is a feminine emotional horde, which libidinally invests in the leader or some totalitarian idea. Political philosophy, on the other hand, divides according to its approach to that mythical entity, the people. The dominant position promotes the unification of power in the Leviathan, the Sovereign, the State. The perfect foil and interlocutor for this mortal God is a homogenized people, nation or class. These are discursive constructions, imagined communities. However, they eventually dominated the political landscape, and political philosophy became preoccupied with theories of representation of the mythical beast. For the other side, from Spinoza to Virno and Negri, the basic political category is the multitude, a multiplicity of singularities that acts publicly and collectively but

does not become a permanent common body or entity. For Hardt and Negri, the multitude replaces social class in late capitalism, being both the creation of Empire's unification of social space and its potential nemesis.

Syntagma Square brought together and transcended the two approaches. The Syntagma multitude, unlike that of Hardt and Negri, was not an abstract social category but a material coming together of people in public spaces; a crowd with a common political desire, which was the radical change of the political system. However, unlike the manipulated and dictated crowd of Le Bon and the psychologists, this is not a mute but a debating, deciding and acting crowd. It does not have representatives and leaders but only its own direct democratic action. According to Aristotle, the *demos* is the multitude in assembly. The physical coming together of bodies is a demonstration, a manifestation. It is a 'monstration', it is the public appearance of a common body and political desire. If, for Hegel, the first step in the emergence of a political subjectivity is the negation of the world, the second is precisely the stepping out in the world, the public appearance, which then returns to self in full identity. A new type of political subjectivity is emerging. It is the result of the return of the right to resistance on post-industrial and post-democratic society.

Immaterial production promotes networking but not political cooperation, communication but not ideological identities, collaboration based on atomization and self-interest. Syntagma Square is the place where the precarious workers and unemployed put into political practice the skills of networking and collaboration we have learnt for work. Young people were told for 20 years that they would get a better life than their parents if they studied, got degrees and undertook lifelong learning. Over 60% of European youth have post-secondary education and exactly the same skills as their rulers. They are now the precariat. One thousand unemployed lawyers, engineers and doctors are more revolutionary than 1000 unemployed workers. The two together can change the definition of politics.

These are the insurgents and *indignados* of Tahrir Square, Puerta del Sol and Syntagma. As force and form, they differ radically from the politics of

Parliament opposite. The occupations organize under a strict axiom of equality. Whoever is in the square, everyone and anyone, is entitled to an equal share of time to put across his or her views. The views of the unemployed and the university professor are given equal time, discussed with equal vigour and put to the vote for adoption. The right to resistance joins equality, the second great revolutionary right, and changes it from a conditioned norm into an unconditional axiom: people *are* free and equal; each counts as one in all relevant groups. Equality is not an objective or effect but the premise and strategic aim of action. If freedom is the symbolic of politics, solidarity is the imaginary and equality its real.

Unlike civil disobedience, democratic disobedience is collective. When the citizens realize that they have no way of participating in decision making or raising their concerns, that democracy has become a behind-the-scenes negotiation between political elites and dubious experts, the obligation to obey recedes. Democratic disobedience transforms people from subjects to citizens; it raises them from executors of commands to active agents of democracy. It rejects politics as simply the negotiation of interests

and administration of the dominant order. Two conceptions of right or the universal fight it out in all three conflicts. On the other hand, an acceptance of the order of things rose to the dignity of general will. It dresses the dominant particular with the mantle of the universal. The other universality is founded on a will created by a diagonal division of the social world, which separates rulers from the ruled and the excluded. This dimension of truth rests not on the existing order but on its negation. It forms an agonistic universality; it emerges not from neo-Kantian philosophical texts but from the struggle of the excluded for social distribution and political representation.

Civil disobedience and democratic counter-hegemony disarticulate actions, behaviours and compartment from the political economy of services, consumption and debt. It undermines the moral economy of personal responsibility and alleged freedom of choice. Disobedience is transformed from a personal moral act to collective emancipatory practice. The biopolitical project to control individual bodies and minds, and turn the people into a pliant body politic, fails. This is what power fears most.