

The Scandal of Democracy: Chaotic Thoughts on the Occupied Squares

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Verily at the first Chaos came to be,
but next wide-bosomed Earth,
the ever-sure foundations of all
Hesiod, *Theogony* (II 116)

Zeteo asked me to write a piece about the relations between Occupy Wall Street and the 15M, a political movement which erupted in Spain a few months before the events of New York. What follows, however, is not a list of affinities and discrepancies between the two, as if I could produce two different static pictures and point toward them while looking for differences and similarities. I could not do such a thing. The squares, so this essay claims, are chaotic democratic processes, and as such they are somewhat impossible to represent. By trying to make sense of such a claim, however, this text already posits a certain idea of democracy as the common place of their encounter.

For someone interested in understanding the political turmoil that has shaken the world in 2011, Hesiod's *Theogony* might look like a strange place to begin. The occupied squares of the world and the great story of how the gods came to be, however, can meet around one of the commonplaces of the critique of democracy, an argument that is at least as old as the idea of democratic equality itself and that consists in accusing it of being irremediably associated with "chaos". The squares, so I want to claim, are chaotic indeed. That is precisely the source of their strength and the principle of their intelligence.

Democratic chaos

Against what our instinctive associations might suggest, chaos does not equal mere disorder or confusion. As the philosopher Edward Casey notes, chaos stands above all in the *Theogony* for a scene of emerging order, a stage of creation and differentiation out of which forms, places and distinctions do not cease to arise. Before any order came to be, says Hesiod, chaos reigned as an unpredictable state in which many different arrangements were still possible. Chaos was, so to speak, the very condition of such possibility, that catastrophic moment in which no single logic or matrix had yet imposed itself as the principle of it all.

The implications of such an idea resound with political consequences. Here, chaos stands for an open-ended mixture of things, forms and names that are not yet, but which makes them conceivable, imaginable and ultimately desirable. Derrida notes this association of chaos with uncertainty, creativity and possibility, while explicitly framing his remark in the language of politics:

This chaos and instability, which is fundamental, founding and irreducible, is at once naturally the worst against which we struggle with laws, rules, conventions, politics and provisional hegemony, but at the same time it is a chance, a chance to change, to destabilize. If there were continual stability, there would be no need for politics, and it is to the extent that stability is not natural, essential or substantial, that politics exists and ethics is possible. Chaos is at once a risk and a chance. (“Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism,” in Mouffe (ed.), *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, Routledge, 1996, p. 84)

At once a risk and a chance, chaos is both what allows for the emergence of order and what defies its apparent necessity and solidity, for it reminds us of the insistent fragility of its origin, of the fact that every order of things is the result of a battle, of a struggle of possibilities in which things could have turned out otherwise. This is why chaos cannot be completely silenced, never completely overcome, but rather permeates reality as the latent possibility of its transformation. Chaos carries the memories of the birth of order. As such, it is the enemy of everything static, for it makes every state of things potentially unstable, manipulable and subject to change.

The thought of instability is no stranger to the critique of democracy. It figured prominently already in book VIII of *The Republic*, where Socrates famously affirms that in democratic cities all sorts of human beings come to be, because democracy contains all species of regimes within it. There are many incipient shapes moving, waiting to emerge and erupt within the unstable order of

the democratic city. (Whether for Socrates this is a good thing is a matter of discussion. Democracy is the best place for a philosopher to look for a regime, but it is also the most prone to rapid corruption and decay.)

This is the scandalous paradox of democracy: the city that provides more room for creativity, innovation and self-correction is also the first one to fall into the vicious circles of transformation and decay. Democracy expands the realm of what is possible; it displaces the limits and creates new horizons for what can be said, thought and done in the *polis*. But precisely in doing so, we are told by Socrates, it cannot but jeopardize its own stasis, its own chances of survival. At once a risk and a chance: the chaotic productivity of democracy is said to be both its greatest virtue and the ultimate cause of its downfall.

The Uncertainty of Theory

The ambivalent machinery of chaos raises many questions that reverberate in the current political atmosphere. On the one hand, it would be hard to deny that the naked productivity of the occupied squares has presented us with all sorts of appealing political scenes, full of creative solutions and unfulfilled political possibilities, which have revivified the idea of democracy and instilled in it new color and strength. Facing a reality dried out by its own lack of political resources, the squares have been bursting with gestures and initiatives that go beyond the dull stability and order of the present. Seen from the perspective of that order, the squares are chaotic indeed. By relentlessly drilling the order's surface, they have opened options and potentials that were simply unthinkable some months ago, but which are now acquiring a visibility and a solidity of their own.

The squares are chaotic because they are full of gestures which make see, which let things move and appear in different ways, which create problems where there were none. Those gestures are above all compositions and associations of ideas, vocabularies and practices. What is “new” in the squares, therefore, is not any particular content or idea, but ways of arranging contents and assembling ideas. The squares are not objects to be seen, but complex ways of seeing that are struggling to emerge, to battle against other ways of seeing that are not compatible with them, which hide precisely what the squares want everyone to see. “Occupation” is a pretty accurate word: the squares struggle to take a place that is not theirs, that is otherwise structured and ordered. To be ordered means to aim at nothing but at preserving oneself, to close down the horizon of this explosion, to limit those multiple, emerging, chaotic possibilities.

On the other hand, however, one would be dangerously wrong to celebrate such an eruption for its own sake. For if the opening of possibilities always carries with it a certain image of freedom, that image does not say anything by itself about the outcome that will finally come into being. There is simply no guarantee that the mere opening of possibilities will bring with it any kind of real improvement in our own lives; there is no assurance that the chances of transformation will prevail over the risks of decay, disaster or regression. As Socrates reminds us, chaos might very well not live up to our hopes, and this is a threat that cannot be simply dismissed.

This radical uncertainty, in fact, has raised all kinds of skeptical withdrawals and cynical criticisms concerning the squares' political ambitions. The enemy, so a common argument could state, is too strong to be harmed by mere gestures and innocent hopes. Given the solidity and complexity of the social order that would need to be dismantled, the chaotic beauty of the squares could in fact be a weakness, rather than a source of strength, for the general purposes of emancipation.

That weakness is usually understood in terms of two main deficits: the squares lack a certain lucidity of analysis, and as a more or less direct consequence of this lack, they also fall short of a unified strategy of action. Instead of narcissistically celebrating their own uncertain potential, so the criticism could go, the squares would do better to provide themselves with more solid weaponry in terms of thought and action. Such weaponry could be based, for example, on a more lucid analysis of the social logic of contemporary capitalism, and on a consequent plan of coordinated and effective resistance that could, say, aim at disrupting the circulation of goods and the flows of capital. If one were to sum up some of the prevalent anxieties concerning the squares' political reality, one could then conclude: they lack a theory that could inform stronger, more solid and sustainable political action.

Apart from being entirely legitimate, this criticism has the virtue of pointing toward an issue of essential importance: the uncertain role that theory has played so far within the squares' political struggles. The chaotic productivity of those struggles, especially in what concerns the invention of political gestures, has been inevitably paired with an almost instinctive rejection of traditional political narratives and vocabularies, no matter how radical or lucid each or any of them might appear given current events and circumstances. Far from being anecdotal, this rejection is related to a number of other aspects that have been puzzling so far, including the often uncomfortable

relations between the movement and intellectuals (one could say: with academia in general), but also with established parties and other political organizations.

It is not hard to note that this diffidence to theory has something to do with the squares' worldwide difficulty to establish univocal accounts and explanations, both of themselves and of the problems they confront. The unending struggles to elaborate unified sets of demands, struggles that have happened along generally similar lines almost in every square, have been enough proof of that strain. These chronically inconclusive processes have often been taken as a sign of immaturity, or else as proof of the emotional rather than political or rational character of these movements. The squares, so it has been said, overflow with political energy and passion, but they lack the ability to unify the multiplicity of their voices into a single, stable and coherent political line.

These diagnostics, however, fail to grasp something essential and constitutive of these movements: their rejection of "transcendent" theory does nothing but reflect *another* rejection. Just as the squares refuse to look at themselves in the mirror of theory, so they reject any internal structures of leadership and representation. They revolt against any trend of unification in thought exactly as they reject any form of centralization in action. Both rejections, the rejection of representation and the rejection of theory, have to do with what is probably one of the most characteristic traits of their political commitment: a deep displacement in their understanding of what constitutes a political voice, and consequently, of what is to be counted as one.

Democracy and Intelligence

As a matter of fact, the rejection of theory does not imply at all an absence of thought. On the contrary: from the beginning, the squares have been flooded with ideas, spontaneous conversations and all sorts of dissents and exchanges, to the point where the recuperation of public discussion, of political speech and reason in its most general form quickly came to be taken as one of the squares' most important identities. (Nothing has been funnier to this respect than the battle around what it means to "open" and to "close down" a space, as the battle was presented in the authorities' accusation almost everywhere. By occupying these public spaces, the protestors were somehow privatizing them, using them for their own purposes—i.e. for public discussion and political deliberation—and excluding thereby the rest of the citizens from their "open" and free enjoyment of the spaces, say, from their right to walk their dogs or go shopping as usual.) Given this abundance of political logos, therefore, one is tempted to ask: what does distinguish such forms of *thought* from the familiar landscapes of *theory*?

Three traits stand out among the squares' scenes of political thought. First, such thought is always *collective*; it is the result of a multiplicity of dialogical practices taking place within a process of self-interpretation (the assembly), which aims at including as many voices as possible. This aim is responsible for the ubiquitous obsession with methods and procedures of decision-making. As a principle, the assembly requires the erasure of any form of distance between the locus of thought, where voices deliberate, and the seat of power, where decisions are made. Even if this leads to multiple vicious circles and dead-ends, the assembly remains committed to a mode of political decision which, being at once collective and horizontal, erases the distance between action and thought.

The second trait is related to this last point. Such thought has been above all *practical* or pragmatic, in the sense that it tends to work on sets of specific problems that need to be solved, rather than establishing any *a priori* positions from which subsequent actions could follow or be deduced. Thought is the task and activity of identifying problems that require solutions, and of defining coordinates to orient upcoming actions. The result is that the political lines of an assembly tend to become identical with the decisions themselves; an assembly is above all what it does; it is the kind of problems that it is able to solve. Thought is nothing other than the process that leads, or leads not, to reaching those solutions and orientations.

Third, this whole process is fundamentally *immanent*: its unity and its very growth derive only from the process itself. Both the problems and the solutions, no matter how old they might be, emerge in each square as an absolute novelty; they do not predate or descend upon the squares, they do not come from an outside, from any distant and separated perspective. Any thought relevant to the process, no matter where or when it was first generated, is transformed by its insertion in the process itself. It then becomes an element among others, and as such can be assembled in wider, more complex formulations, or else be dismantled into smaller elements, only to be incorporated again into new and different propositions. It is a process with no outside, a process of pure materiality in which there is no authorship of thoughts, as there is none of actions. And yet there is never such a thing as a single universal voice; there is no whole speaking in the name of its parts. The singularity of the voices remains perfectly distinguishable, but the voices are without names, they are anonymous voices gathering in a common conversation, exactly like their bodies and forces gather as so many resources available for the resolution of problems. Nothing is shared but a pragmatic pattern of self-correction which, when confronted with a problem, fails again and again

until it comes forth with a practical solution. (Once it is found, the solution will become available to all and hence adoptable by all. It somehow erases its own history). So there is no unified and detached theory of the whole; instead, the squares are traversed by multiple processes of collective, practical and immanent thought.

The general picture—except that it is not a picture, for it is not a static object that a detached spectator could look at from a distance—is not very far away from the political dream of John Dewey. Dewey believed that by affording to all the conditions and the resources to engage in collective, intelligent problem-solving, a community could find within itself an almost unlimited capacity for growth; that is, for enriching, ordering and freely determining its own experience. This is Dewey's vision of democracy: a critical community of deliberation and cooperation, which as such knows no limits in the creative exercise of its autonomy. It is a vision that is similar indeed to the scenes witnessed in the squares of 2011, except for one subtle discrepancy. Dewey believed that general education was the key to realizing this dream. Only education could spread and socialize the habits of intelligence, the skills and abilities which are needed in order to engage in the collective experience of democratic problem-solving. Unlike Dewey, however, the squares of 2011 have subverted the implicit temporality of the process. Intelligence, in the squares, is the name of a scandal, for it is a process of education without educators.

The Force of a Scandal

The scandal of democracy consists in decreeing the equality of the voices. That equality is in itself performative, which means that it sanctions itself immediately, with no previous qualification or authorization whatsoever. So democracy does not bring with itself any promise according to which, in due time, the political capacities and abilities of all will rise to a certain standard, a level necessary for full scale civic participation and intelligent debate. (That promise found one of its clearest formulations in Kant's "What is Enlightenment?": grow up already, abandon your state of intellectual minority, and we shall discuss among adults. Democracy, in a sense, blows up the political distinction between adulthood and minority).

Democracy sanctions the equality of voices right here and right now, without further expectations, with no need of preparation or previous authorization. This is why democracy does not socialize intelligence as one would distribute the goods of production or the extensions of land. Democracy decrees the radical *equality of intelligences*, and as such it brings forth an immediate effect,

an instant empowerment of voices which, unlearned and unheard, are now to be counted as equal, equal to any and equal to all.

From the beginning, there has been an almost irresistible temptation to look for some kind of mediation that could alleviate the scandal. Political philosophy has often been the place of a quest for the theoretical and institutional arrangement that could sustain such an equality, that could render the order of democracy stable: a perfectly balanced dialogue, a counting machine, the invisible stage which all could equally access.

All those attempts, however, are doomed to failure because, in itself, democracy cannot sanction a *stasis*. As Socrates shows in *The Republic*, democracy sanctions chaos with all its performative force. Democracy is that disordered state of conflicting, emerging productivities in which many voices can be heard, many problems can be seen, many solutions can be thought, and yet no one can fully arrest the movement, no one can secure the ground upon which democracy would want to impose itself. For as soon as a single principle is introduced (be it the principle of representation or, more simply, the principle of the assembly itself, with its cult of unity and its obsession with bureaucratic procedures), the chaotic productivity is already beginning to be expelled; it is already limited by an order that is struggling to establish itself, so as to put each thing in its place.

Each thing in its place: the squares reject theory because theory re-presents, because it orders the scene. Theory attributes reasons and names, it distinguishes subjects and objects, means and ends, goals and conditions. In theory's stead, the squares were born as the relentless effort to coordinate myriad processes of thought and action whose trajectories intersect, crossing common places and problems. The squares were born as the ephemeral, chaotic juxtaposition and assembly of those forces. The more the process tended to be ordered, to be structured according to a principle or a set of rules (even if they sought nothing but the preservation of the equality of the voices), the more that very process became degraded and unable to stay true to its purpose. In contrast to what many believed at first, the strength of an assembly cannot be technological. This means that the strength of an assembly derives only from a composition of forces (bodies, ideas, practices). As soon as that composition is blocked and, for example, dissent stops being a dynamic principle of growth and becomes instead, a static principle of order, the thought of the assembly is blocked too. This is why an assembly can never depend on a particular methodology for the solution of its problems. Those problems are always political and never technical: trying to impose on them a technical

solution, to rely entirely on the enforcement of a procedure or a method (instead of articulating new compositions) inevitably fails and does nothing but extend the agony.

So here is the problem. From an outsider's perspective, there is no doubt that if the squares are to become more solid agents of social and political transformation, their capacities for coordinating thought and action, and for sharing resources, talents and abilities, will need to expand immensely. And yet precisely for this reason it is quite possible that, if such thing were to happen, the squares would not take the form of a political body. There would be no Leviathan, no organism ordered around a center, having a single voice or a unitary theory as its will. For if that were to be the case, then the squares' instinctive attachment to democratic chaos (or, to put this in other terms, to direct democracy or autonomy) would need to become irrelevant, to be perverted and disappear along the way like the democratic city in *The Republic*. But that attachment is precisely the squares' deepest source of power; it is the origin of their motion and the only reason for their growth. Without the compromise and the insistence upon the scandalous chaos of democracy, the squares would lose their main reason to exist, and there could be no monster either. If the squares are to keep growing, chaos will grow in and with them.

What forms and compositions could emerge from such growth is hard to imagine right now, just as the very fact of the squares was impossible to anticipate not long ago. Perhaps the challenge is too big to be even conceived of; perhaps the forces of chaos are confronted by an enemy that is too strong, by stakes and problems too great or too complex, by too desperate an urgency to compose new relations and ever growing alliances and fronts. Perhaps there is less substance in the squares than we actually believe, and once this euphoric celebration dissipates, little more is left than a mere hope to be "rescued by the unexpected". In a certain sense, however, the squares *are* themselves the unexpected. Today, they are still that vector of instability and possibility: they are still at once a risk and a chance. The squares are still beautifully chaotic, no matter how structured is the reality in which they came to breathe, and how ordered will be the accounts that will finally put them in their place, confined within a story as the agent of order that they once were not.

The end.