Direct Democracy, Social Ecology and Public Time

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One could argue that since the dawn of modernity, humanity is in a situation of constant crisis. Today, however, we find ourselves amidst a nexus of crises, economic crisis, political crisis, ecological and anthropological crisis, while the human environments' very existence is threatened. The privatization of public space, under the false identification of public and state, transforms social geography and the public architecture of life. We also witness the end of national politics under the grid of transnational networks of power, combined with a revival of nationalistic rhetoric as a means of manipulating populations.

In our attempt to clarify this broader and more diverse crisis, this crisis of significations which we experience at the beginning of the 21st century, it may be useful to delimit, schematically, some areas of its manifestation, while the globalization of power and market mechanisms spreads the net of bureaucratic capitalism across the globe and stretches it to its limits, internally and externally.

Internally, because the system waives the requirement to provide a coherent meaning for the populations it dominates, deregulating the processes necessary for social cohesion, which also ensured the psychical internalization of the norms and the purposes of the system by the majority.

Externally, because the system itself, which was never actually controlled or regulated, is unable to fulfill both its general purpose (which is inherently irrational and incomplete), namely the unlimited dominance of rationalistic control and capital growth, and the specific interests of the

semi-clustered groups, elites and coalitions that make up the power network of globalized bureaucratic capitalism, a fraction of which was revealed via the Panama papers.

Above all, the system meets the natural limit, the exhaustion of the available resources, both environmental and human. Besides its unlimited ambition, there is a destruction limit on the brink of which we walk blindfolded, the brink of natural disaster, environmental disaster, social disaster, and even nuclear disaster. The whole range of nightmares and dystopias stand like potential realities before us.

The most recent and visible aspect of the multifaceted crisis of significations is the economic crisis that apparently began in 2008 with the bust of the mortgage bubble in the United States, a bubble whose creation, however, must be placed at least in the 1970s, the era of the oil crisis of OPEC (1973), of the total surrender of the once strong North American trade unions, and the beginning of Reagan-Thatcher's 'conservative counter-revolution'

The main feature of this 'conservative revolution' was the triumph of closed interest groups that promoted the most predatory and aggressive doctrine of capitalism, the extreme neoliberalism of the Chicago School and Milton Friedman. This meant that State authorities swiftly and voluntarily abolished the financial regulation tools that formally kept multinational private capital into check. It also meant the adoption of the "Shock Doctrine", as described by Naomi Klein, for the subjugation of societies and the dismantlement of organized labor.

At the same time, it meant the privatization of public space, which, strengthened by the consummation of personal time, led to a rapid psychical internalization of the significations of consumerism and market individualism, starting an age, as Castoriadis labeled it, of insignificance. The emergence of huge megacities smothered the urban public space under a

network of commercial zones and the basis of societal cohesion, the spirit of community, withered away. When community between people vanishes, the communal bond between nature and society is shattered.

The dawn of the 21st century was marked by the rupture of the bubble and the violent overcoming of insignificance, by the implementation of neoliberal policies on a supranational level, by the ascending of international financial organizations to a central decision-making level, the violent dissolution of local communities and the expansion of the privatization of public space and personal time. But this attack was also met with successive revolts, the awakening of a universality of solidarity and resistance, the creation of imaginary communities and the spreading of the concept of the commons via and beyond the Internet, the breaking of borders and the dynamic struggle for real political democracy. Nothing ensures the outcome of social conflicts, but certainly these are now carried out on multiple levels and globally, while what is at stake is the future itself, in the most comprehensive sense, the existence of a future.

Another crisis that began with the dawn of industrial capitalism and the creation of the mass-production machine is the environmental crisis, the ecological crisis, the effects of which are already evident in an emphatic way, although strong interests are trying to disguise them. It is now explicit and clear that the planet has natural limits, and that the degree of exploitation has already exceeded the renewal capacities of various ecosystems. There is no need to argue here for what everyone now knows and witnesses in the perturbation of natural processes, extreme meteorological phenomena and the mass extinction of species.

Scientists have now attributed the name “Anthropochene” to a period beginning with the Industrial Revolution and extending to the undefined future, elevating modern human activity to the level of geological forces.

These two types of crisis, economic and ecological, constitute a broader crisis of growth. In the sense that the imaginary signification of unlimited growth tends to make a desert of the human environment itself, and in the sense that it seeks to dominate the totality of society, accelerating desertification in both the natural and the cultural dimension. However, the full implementation of the growth doctrine seems to be hindered by three main factors:

– The exhaustion of natural resources.

– The collective resistance of communities and the psychic resistance of individuals who create new, global networks of sociality at a time when traditional institutions are being dismantled.

– The fundamental contradiction within capitalism itself, which objectifies people whilst its function is based precisely on the exploitation of human ingenuity.

To the extent that the economic motivation of unlimited growth and profitability remains the dominant imaginary signification, the tension between the system’s pursuits and the rapid self-destruction brought about by their achievement is at the same time a field of constant reproduction of the crisis.

The privatization of urban public space, which began under the false identification of the public and the state, changed the social geography and the public architecture of the city. Capital cities were transformed into vast population-rich hubs, with energy demands greater than their own countries, while the inner space and time of the city is divided into three distinct and isolated zones, which hold amongst them external exploitative relations. The mansions of the dominant elite, the small and medium-sized blocks of flats and offices of the majority, and the ghetto jungles of marginalized minorities. A vast network of markets and malls divide and at

the same time connect those isolated zones under the circulation of products.

> *While the cities expand, public space and time, the foundations of community and the conditions for democracy are narrowing, leaving the cities hollow as hives of private cells where circulation replaces community.*

Looking more carefully, we can distinguish, both at a microsocial and at a macro-social level, the deep erosion and irreversible decline of four dominant metaphysical positions that constitute the ideological foundations of modernity and the imaginary axioms of the modern worldview.

By ‘metaphysical position’ we mean the philosophical, ideological and psychological stance of treating general descriptive terms as actual, self-contained beings. The use of general descriptive terms, such as “humanity”, for example, is a necessity of linguistic consistency, but their hypostatization is the metaphysical leap of traditional ontology. All four modern metaphysical positions are generalizations of generic terms, configurations of imaginary persons or beings with a single will and conscience, to which the origin of the established authorities is attributed.

We will call them Metaphysics of the Nation, Metaphysics of History, Metaphysics of the Subject and Metaphysics of Reason. They are a nexus of nuclear imaginary meanings and ideological props of the instituted social imaginary that have risen as granite certainties but now deflate like balloons.

As we know, the nation-state has relied on the metaphysical idea of a common will, a national will, a substitute for the living people by the imaginary entity of a ‘nation’ with, supposedly, a single will, single interests and a single “destiny”.

The metaphysics of the Nation has been the dominant paradigm

of established political authority in the modern world. Ethnocratic bureaucracies, founded on a single, official language and education according to the standards of industrial production, have proved to be excellent matrices for the reproduction of capitalist imaginary significations through the emotional investment of individuals to the ideal of a national homogeneous organization of social life. The state fortified this Nation-metaphysics with a series of unifying institutional structures. Integrative education structures, unifying military structures, unified social benefits structures, the implementation of which followed the practices of ethnic cleansing and regional genocide.

Today, the abandonment by the state, not only of financial regulations, but also of social functions and services, deprives it of any social rooting. As a result, while there is still a dominant national propaganda in every social field, from entertainment to politics, the real strength of the nation-state is declining. But as the metaphysics of Nation collapses, the metaphysics of History follows, because the whole dominant national narrative was based on the metaphysics of a “historical mission” on a trajectory of unlimited growth.

This affects a further fluidization of borders, as the distinction between what is considered interior and what is considered exterior liquidates, while war fronts multiply. The very form of modern warfare and “anti-terrorist” campaigns raises new borders within societies, within cities, among neighborhoods, across countries.

At the same time, the shaking of the metaphysics of the Nation also shakes the politics of representative republics, revealing again the existing divide of interests and sentiments between society and the state. The recent Trumpian degradation of U.S. politics signifies something, by signifying the nothing, the representative void.

We live in the first period in history when the urban

population has exceeded the rural, but the city, as a political and social entity and unity, is being dismantled. It is being rebuilt into a set of segregated functions, as regards both public space and public time. Likewise, personal time is sliced into distinct occupations defined by production or consumption, and the individual is transformed into a cluster of functions.

The emergence of the Internet and the expansion of social media have brought a new field of projection and reconstruction of the public and personal identity with infinite possibilities. The digital person, at the same time fragmentary but also a multiplicity of representations of the natural person, brings forth a new problematic of the individual's relation to himself and to society. It offers a world-wide surface for the reflection, projection and recreation of personal preferences and views, in a completely de-corporalized and virtual manner. On one hand, it seems to provide the ground for a deeper personal fragmentation and isolation.

On the other hand, the Internet, as a means of direct and simultaneous global communication, has displayed liberating capabilities, by disseminating knowledge, socializing research, communicating societies, overcoming censorship, overcoming ethnic and cultural exclusions. It has become a tool for widespread solidarity and the emergency of new social movements, as well as an instrument of widespread control.

On the Internet, the user is at the same time invulnerable and vulnerable, indifferent as a digital self that is materially detached from his physical existence, vulnerable as a physical/psychical subjectivity with a social identity embedded in the broader social environment.

Let us not forget that the digital self is a patchwork of images, preferences, comments, trends and contacts, a conscious reconstruction of the individual projected on a

virtual global public horizon. The social cohesion of the subject's image, formerly dependent on the natural presence of the individual, dissolves within the digital multiplicity of pseudo-personas. Thus, traditional metaphysics loses its original foundation, the social significance of the individual's consistency as a singular actual personality.

We will observe that of these four metaphysical positions, the metaphysics of the Nation and the metaphysics of history refer to the public and the collective. They attempt to answer the question of who we are. They have to do with the community's position within time and the relationship of the community with time. Where we are, when we are.

The metaphysics of the Subject and the metaphysics of Reason refer to the individual and the private. They attempt to answer the question of who I am. They have to do with the person's position towards the world and the relationship of the individual with the world. What is human and what is worldly.

The metaphysics of the Nation and the metaphysics of Reason refer to identity placed out of time, do not include time, they display imaginary eternal identities.

The metaphysics of the Subject and the metaphysics of History refer to temporal identity, include time and have to do with causality and succession, constituting imaginary causation chains.

What is happening is that a series of certainties that informed the dominant modern worldview have collapsed. Together, a series of false separations and identifications crumbles. It is the false distinction between a lonely person and an impersonal society. It is the false identification of the State with Power, the principle that someone else will always decide for society, which is actually challenged by the efforts for local direct democracy, by autonomous networks and

societies that now seek self-government, facing the most violent repression, with the most powerful means, in the most fierce world conflict in history.

As we experience the decline of the national, locality is linked with globality. We are both local and global. Everything that happens locally is projected globally, and what is displayed globally is diffused locally. There is no detached place.

On the opposite side, against every manifestation of the crisis, new possibilities open, new significations emerge, the values of solidarity and community are revived on a broader scale and in a radical political context, the project of direct democracy.

What we have seen in the years following the dawn of the 21st century is a multifaceted resistance of societies. A resistance not formulated in terms of electoral representation, but in terms of autonomy, positive search for a new meaning in invented communal forms of life. The refutation of sovereign institutions becomes even more obvious, by the positive activity of social movements, by the emergence of primary institutions of direct democracy, social solidarity and local self-government, to some extent.

So, we find the crisis of the metaphysics of the Nation manifested as a crisis of representation and identity, with a revival of nationalistic rhetoric. Against this, social movements are organized in terms of direct democracy and global communication. Global networks of solidarity challenge the validity of official borders, forming nodes of free social spaces and free collectives that challenge the jurisdiction of the state.

We have seen the crisis of the metaphysics of history, which manifests itself as the doctrine of the “end of history”, as a crisis of the association of social time with subjective

temporality, a crisis of the relation to the past and the future, a loss of the future and a leveling of the past. Against this, social struggles and social movements create new forms of free public time and an opening to a common future. A new sense of relation to the environment, social and natural, through the experience of local struggles for the environment, from Dakota, USA to Halkidiki, Greece, provides the seed for a new sensus communis and a new sense of common good and humanity.

So, we see the emergence of social movements unrelated to the traditional trade unions or parties, which do not seek the implementation of a ready-made plan of another society but create a new open field of free public space and time and, as Jacques Ranciere might say, constitute another world and another history, a world and a history of emancipation. Such is the Zapatista movement, and parts of the liberation movement in Rojava but also urban grassroots movements in Western cities.

These are movements without leaders, movements that seem fragmented, but which allow the free networking and complementarity on many fields and places within the broader socio-historical, precisely because they have a common project and create a common meaning. And this is self-government.

> *It is self-government without authoritative power, without representation, without rulers, without delegations. Direct democracy.*

And that indicates a different answer both to the crisis of the Ethnocratic state and political representation, and to the identity crisis of the individual, who finds it difficult to identify with national state mechanisms, as was the case, not because propaganda is not sufficient, nor because there is access to the experience of a wider world, but because these mechanisms themselves have been exposed to signify nothing.

What they are is empty automations deprived of their original meaning and their old vision.

The social movements that emerge redefine private and public relations, in the sense that they create a free public space, which does not belong to private capital neither to the state. And a free public time of social interaction and political decision, like the Nuit Debut movement symbolically expressed by the creation of a prolonged March.

But the social background of modern human existence, the urban landscape of megacities is a problem in itself. The modern city is not an ancient democratic polis, but, as Aristotle would claim, Babylon. Modern collectivities create, within the urban network, new free social spaces, like Nosotros in Athens or Micropolis in Thessaloniki, that can become seeds of new forms of life, but their existence, being against the dominant paradigm, faces tremendous pressure and is dependent on their opening to the broader society.

Democratic ecological collectivities must create institutions of education and communication, institutions with cohesive political activity on a wider socio-historical field. Free social spaces are forms that already go beyond collegiality by the action of which they are created.

We may perhaps schematically designate four moments to the political time of autonomous collectivities. They all involve and presuppose a public conflict with established authorities.

The first moment, when the collectivity opens up to society involves the initial creation of a broader social environment. The creation of free social spaces seems to be the limit of this moment. If this limit is not exceeded through the connection with the broader society, beyond collegiality, free social spaces become self-referential and sooner or later collapse internally.

If the limit is exceeded, then we proceed to the next moment,

which can only occur within society, that is, beyond the collective, since the activity of the collectivity exceeds the collectivity itself. It involves the co-creation of networks of solidarity, communication and action, local, regional and global and the creation of free open public spaces. It means the creation of a limited public space and time of communication and a limited public space and time of political decision.

> *The opening of free public space presupposes a break with state and capitalist mechanisms.*

It is a first step. The second step is explicit self-determination, institution-building through direct democracy and public deliberation, in order to realize autonomy in terms of social functions and a complete rupture with the state.

We can imagine explicit self-determination if we consider a self-sufficient local network that is not subjected to state or capitalist jurisdiction and taxation. It constitutes a fundamental division between free communities and the state, but is not an autonomous society still. It means the establishment of a complete public space and time of free communication but a limited public space and time of political decision.

In order for social autonomy to be realized, society must have the power to explicitly re-create its central institutions, namely politics, justice, education in a democratic and equalitarian manner. The people, as free individuals, must be able to establish laws by means of open, equalitarian public deliberation, with the establishment of direct democracy. This presupposes the abolishment of the state and the subordination of economy to democratic politics. But it also presupposes the psychical transformation of the individual, to an autonomous, reflective and deliberative subjectivity. It presupposes a democratic education which cannot be separated by the

experience of direct democracy in practice, through the praxis of autonomy. It also means establishing a complete public space and time of free communication and a complete public space and time of political decision and action.

This is the challenge that communities and societies face today, under the threat of disaster, for the future remains as always, an open future for societies to create.

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