

Direct democracy Demonstrations in Greece

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During the day, one can see several hundred working class demonstrators against the cutbacks at the postal service near Syntagma Square (the parliament), with the fear that the government will privatize it and sell it to a German company which will lay off large numbers of postal workers (perhaps over 50%). At 6 o'clock in Syntagma Square, a crowd starts to gather under a banner which says "no to apathy - direct democracy (amesi demokratia)." It is the ninth day of such gatherings and discussions. There is an open mike for speeches and proposals. By 8, some 50,000 people have gathered (I am with some friends near the speaker on the edge of the people seated, the crowd surges around, and up the high steps to the road that separates the Parliament and may extend over in front of it. The woman who moderates (one of several moderators) calls for a continuation of a discussion proposed the previous night (that meeting ended at 4 AM), and takes hands for 20 speakers (eventually there is a vote which approves hearing from all of them before continuing).

Most of the crowd is young, the people in their twenties. The European Union, to which the Greek government is obsequious, even though headed by a Socialist (George Papandreu, who is reputed - a rarity among leading Socialists - an honest man), has demanded that the Greek parliament vote on June 15 on a maximum salary for every young worker before she reaches the age of 25: five hundred - 500 - euros a month. This is a poverty, near starvation wage for a young Athenian (barely enough to pay rent - perhaps if 4 people share an apartment - let alone eat).

The Greek parliament has been a weak institution, limited by fascism and a military coup and tyranny (1967-74). It is a series of small desks (one has to hunch in to sit in them, as I discovered when I took my students to see it three years ago). There is no space for an audience. Parliament in Greece is confined, and behind closed doors. A generally discussed proposal in the crowd is to block the parliamentarians from entering the parliament, prevent a vote, get them to drop the proposal. That is a sort of Madison, Wisconsin-like demonstration. The spreading influence of Tunisia, Egypt, Madison, and the indignados in Spain, is visible here, though the revolutionary intensity as well as a sentiment that violence may be inevitable (government violence, but more strikingly revolutionary violence) is in the air.

A friend of mine, a government worker, spoke of how the regime has diminished already low wages for all public workers 29% (20% a year ago, 9% in the last two months). The regime has also levied steep additional taxes on ordinary people. His wife does not have a job; they have two kids. Yet he will pay an additional 2000 euros in taxes. He is hurting economically, and he is among the comparatively well-off (speaks of himself as an average middle class person during a period when for the middle class, the rug has been removed from under their feet; he knows how much worse off the workers and the poor are). The government

has isolated itself with the European capitalist elite. The sympathy for revolution among the people is broad (he speaks of the events coming to a bad end, some sort of revolutionary violence, though he favors it).

A small number of Greek magnates, some 40 people, got corrupt deals from the conservative and socialist governments. The style of the deals was a la Dick Cheney and W. for contracts in Iraq – private deals with one bid to the biggest companies. The wealthy have many houses, store their money abroad, threaten to invest abroad if they are taxed. But the Socialist government protects them, serves the Europe of bankers which demands Greece pay down its debt – \$500 billion euros (the net wealth of the 40 men is said, in the crowd, to be \$600 billion). The direct democracy movement thinks that those who have gotten rich off corruption could be taxed to pay off the debt and still left \$100 billion. But the government and Europe insist (as if they were American bankers, under the influence of AIG and Goldman Sachs), the poor and the unemployed will pay.

A socialist Defense Minister is also going to court now (for laundering money, for building houses and not declaring the income to taxes). He had mandated substantial weapons purchases from the United States for use against Turkey (stemming the rivalry over Cyprus, inter alia)...But Greece does not suffer from American militarism (the war complex: nearly a trillion dollars spent by the Pentagon and intelligence apparatus per year including huge outlays for shadow – privatized – militaries like Xe/Blackwater and others, an empire of some 1280 bases abroad...). The Greeks are not militarists and have little use for buying American weapons at the price of hunger and joblessness.

A button appears at the end of the evening: “it’s not my debt, I will not pay.” Speakers talk about removing parliamentary immunity, trying the parliamentary representatives for crimes, putting them in jail. There is an air of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette in the air here. A reactionary paper, the Katherin, snobbily refers to the mostly young demonstrators as “bored,” detests democracy, gives no report on the intense discussions into the night...But a cartoon displays helicopters taking off the politicians from parliament (politicians are welcome says the sign on the helicopter door), the crowd with pitchforks at the gates in Syntagma...

In a well-to-do suburb of Athens, another direct democracy demonstration is taking place. This one is attacked by the police, 10 arrested. At Syntagma Square, a crowd of motorcyclists (supporters of the Panhellenic Socialist Movement, apparently) rev up noisily, gassily, to distract the attention of the crowd from the speakers. Everyone looks for a police provocation or attack...There has been so far none; in this respect, the government respects the demonstrations – it would be an international incident to attack 50,000 people in Syntagma in front of the Parliament. Given the example of the suburbs and the increasingly threatening mood of the crowds (people want the parliamentarians in jail), I wonder: how long before the military is called out?

I spoke with a retired military officer two days ago, who is now working at a private corporation, even his job in doubt. He too spoke of revolution (as someone who has written a book on Marx’s Politics and long been interested in revolution, now nonviolent revolution, I was amazed to have powerful conversations with two middle class people (out of three I talked with; the third is also for fundamental change) who had straightforwardly the vision and expectation of violent revolution....

Today (Sunday, the twelfth day of the demonstrations) there is to be a huge demonstration in Syntagma; perhaps a million people are expected. There are calls out for simultaneous demonstrations in European capitals, in Lisbon, Madrid, Paris, Berlin...But the Greek one will be the biggest. A friend – a teacher – and his wife plan specially to come from Argos (and there will be a large presence from outside Athens). The sentiment for change – and against the European Union/government – is fierce, increasing in waves.

There is no obvious leadership for this revolution. The teacher along with other intellectuals, lawyers and some former government officials is proposing a constitutional change, a fourth body, a parliament of the citizens, to meet yearly (selected by lot, so as to be not under the influence of the parties). This is an old institution, described initially by Aristotle (in the Constitution of Athens). In it, the parliamentary leader would have to explain how his policies are consistent with the promises of his campaign and benefit the people, achieve a common good. If the government has become too corrupt (as is now particularly the case), the leader and other officials can be subjected to a censure, required not to seek an additional term, and even brought to trial. My guess from listening to the discussion in Syntagma is that this would be a popular suggestion.

Buried for so many years, alive, when I first came four years ago, only in the monuments on the hills of Athens high above the struggling city, a series of class explosions (last year against the police murder of a teenage demonstrator) are now becoming/inspiring democratic discussions about how to make a representative system — a system of two or multi-parties – serve a common good rather than the rich (what I call an oligarchy with parliamentary forms in Democratic Individuality). Suddenly, Greek political thought is again at a democratic height (for it is now far more democratic in bent than Aristotle, ultimately the advisor to Alexander and an enemy of democratic protestors).

In Greece, the striving to articulate popular democracy – what the idea of the democracy of ordinary citizens, direct democracy means – is much deeper than elsewhere in Europe or the United States (in America, SNCC and SDS had ideas of participatory democracy, realized by SNCC in the organizing for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in 1964 which revolutionized the Democratic Party by 1972 –that was an integrated convention, unlike the previous meetings which had been anchored in the segregated South. But that impulse is sadly not to the fore in the United States since, even in the anti-Iraq war movement (the Obama campaign was rank and file and had some interesting conversations about what a still hierarchical campaign might do, but was not deeply democratic).

In Athens, however, people take heart from direct democracy, the inheritance of ancient Greece, and the institutions which might make it work. This is one of the most striking political developments in the new world that has blossomed from Arab spring.

Marta Soler has written a letter about the police attack on the indignados in Barcelona – also protestors for direct democracy, see here<<http://democratic-individuality.blogspot.com/2011/05/marta-soler-on-indignados-in-spain.html> – the day after the election of the Right in Spain. No longer fearing a backlash in the election and using the excuse that those celebrating FC Barcelona against Manchester United in the Champions League might "create a mess" and somehow the indignados might add to it, the CIU (the Catalan reactionary government) sent the police to attack nonviolent demonstrators in the Placa Catalunya. But many more came to replace those expelled or injured. This was a victory – symbolic and practical – for the international democratic movement.

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