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## Abstract

This article departs from accounts that either deify Indignant Squares as a model for 21st century political praxis or demonize them as apolitical/post-political crowd gatherings. By performing a closer ethnographic reading of the Indignants' protests at Athens' Syntagma Square, we depict the Indignant Squares as a consensual and deeply spatialized staging of dissent, which nevertheless harbours in its underbelly internally conflicting and often radically opposing political imaginaries. A closer reading of the organization, practice and discourses that evolved at Syntagma Square unearths the existence of not one, but two distinct Indignant Squares, both at Syntagma, each with its own topography (upper and lower square), and its own discursive and material practices. Although both squares staged dissent, they nevertheless generated different (opposing, even) political imaginaries. The 'upper square' often divulged nationalistic or xenophobic discourses; the 'lower square' centred around more organized efforts to stage inclusive politics of solidarity. The paper suggests that, rather than focusing on the homogenizing terms *Indignants' movement/Indignant Squares* we should instead be trying to develop a more nuanced theoretical understanding and a more finely grained empirical analysis of the discursive and spatial choreographies of these events. This, we argue, would allow us to go beyond either celebrating them as new political imaginaries, or condemning them as expressions of a post-political era. Talking of 'Indignant Squares' in the plural helps one explore in more grounded ways both the limitations and the possibilities that these events offer for opening up (or closing down) democratic politics.

## Keywords

Athens, crisis, democratic politics, dissent, Greece, Indignant Squares, occupy, post-politics, radical imaginary, Syntagma

## Introduction

Inspired by the so-called 'Arab Spring', the protests of the *Indignados* in Spain, the Indignants (*Αγανακτισμένοι*) in Greece and the *Occupy* in London and New York, generated a broad range of counter-hegemonic discourses and spatial practices that

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reasserted the importance of urban public spaces in expressing political dissent (Madden and Vradis, 2012; Merrifield 2013; Smith, 2013). However, the Indignant Squares and the Occupy protests were met in academic and media analysis with a combination of excitement and cynicism. On the one hand, they kindled hope for the emergence of a new political imagination and practice, and were therefore hailed as early signs of a nascent global political movement. On the other hand, they were condemned as a cacophony of disparate voices, with no clear political direction or claims.

This paper departs from accounts that either deify Indignant Squares as a model for 21st century political praxis (Douzinas, 2011, 2013; Rogkas, 2011), or demonize them as apolitical/post-political crowd gatherings (Pantazopoulos, 2011). By performing a closer ethnographic reading of the Indignants' protests at Athens' Syntagma Square, we depict the Indignant Squares as a consensual and deeply spatialized staging of dissent (Dikeç, 2005; Swyngedouw, 2011a, 2011b), which nevertheless harbours in its underbelly internally conflicting and often radically opposing political imaginaries (Castoriadis, 1987; Kaika, 2010, 2011). Grounding its analysis on the Greek *Αγανακτισμένοι* (Indignants) at Syntagma Square, the paper charts the multiplicity of organizational practices, discourses and spatial configurations at the Square, in order to depict the events that took place there neither as a cacophony of apolitical voices, nor as the beginnings of a coherent political movement. A closer look at the organization, practice and discourses at Syntagma Square unearths the existence of not one, but two distinct Indignant Squares, both at Syntagma, each with its own topography (upper and lower square), and its own discursive and material practices.<sup>1</sup> Although both squares staged dissent, they nevertheless generated different (opposing, even) political imaginaries. The 'upper Syntagma square', initially a gathering of people united by the desire to protest against corruption and the lost political and economic stability, often articulated nationalistic and/or xenophobic discourses. The 'lower Syntagma square' – equally an initial gathering of people united by desire to protest – evolved in more organized efforts to stage a more inclusive politics of solidarity.

Building on an understanding of politics that is articulated around the distinction between politics

and the political, we seek to offer a nuanced reading of the occupation of the square. Rather than focusing on the homogenizing term *Indignants'* movement or *Indignant Squares* we instead try to unpack the plurality of politics but also the limitations and internal contradictions within these events. We argue that a more nuanced theoretical understanding of different types of politics and the political, and a more finely grained empirical analysis of the discursive and spatial choreographies of these events, would allow us to go beyond either celebrating them as new political imaginaries, or condemning them as expressions of a post-political era. Our aim is not to account for the totality of the discourses and practices that were articulated within and through the Indignant Squares. Rather, we seek to mobilize the occupation of Syntagma Square as a living laboratory to explore how talking of 'Indignant Squares' in the plural (see Kioupiolis, 2011) helps us understand in more grounded ways both the limitations and the possibilities that these events offer for opening up (or closing down) democratic politics.

The paper's first section engages with theoretical debates that unpack different understandings of politics and the political and explores how these foreground understandings of the relationship between politics and space. The following sections chart the discourses and practices that underpinned the material choreographies of the 'upper' and 'lower' Syntagma squares, and assert the centrality of space in imagining and materializing alternative (democratic or non-democratic) politics. The final section explores the limitations between this specific spatialization of political imaginaries and democratic politics. The empirical analysis in the paper is based on participant observation and discourse analysis of the press, social media and Syntagma's Popular Assembly votes and minutes.

### **The spatialization of the political**

The exploration of the dialectic between space and politics has a rich history in geography and political theory. As Dikeç (2005) notes, 'spatialization ... becomes the very condition of politics precisely because it constitutes an integral element of the disruption of the natural order of domination' (Dikeç,

2005: 181; see also Springer, 2010: 18–19). Although a full review of the history of the space/politics debate lies outside the scope of this article, it is important to note here that Manuel Castells (1983) was amongst the first scholars to celebrate the role that deeply spatialized and localized urban problems can play in making previously unconnected urban dwellers get together and articulate common narratives and desires (see also Arampatzi and Nicholls, 2012). However, localized issues as a key driver for forging new political agendas have also received more critical analysis, notably by David Harvey (1996, 2000) who argued that, for all their potential to generate universalizing emancipatory ideas and practices, the ‘militant particularisms’ often favoured by place-based resistance can be profoundly conservative, can evolve around the perpetuation of social relations of domination and can run ‘the risk of sliding back into a parochialist politics’ (Harvey, 1996: 324).

Nevertheless, recent research has offered a more finely grained analysis, emphasizing the strategic role that key actors within local social movements can play in bringing previously geographically or conceptually unconnected struggles into dialogue with one another (Arampatzi and Nicholls, 2012; Diani, 2004; Emirbayer and Goodwin, 1994; Gould, 2004; Graeber, 2002; Leontidou, 1993, 2010; Routledge, 2003; Tarrow and McAdam, 2005). Melucci’s (1996) and Castells’ own (2011) recent work has also emphasized how participation in networks constitutes an essential element of forming collective identities, transforming cultures and subjectivities, and developing a common repertoire for international political action. For Rancière (1995), the point of politics is precisely this rupture with previous subject positions through the staging of processes of political subjectivation.

The Indignant Squares, we argue, offered a contemporary living laboratory for embodying and exploring further the debate on space, politics and political subjectivation in three distinct ways. Firstly, by reasserting the centrality of space in the process of questioning the structuring principles of the established order (Žižek, 1991), what Rancière defines as *the police*. Secondly, by becoming a potential material/spatial outlet where *the police* and *the political* could meet, a

meeting that Rancière would define as *politics* (Swyngedouw, 2011b: 376). Finally, by highlighting the limitations of the spatialization of *the political* in entering a praxis of *politics* even when it succeeds in becoming ‘the place where community as such is brought into play’ (Nancy, 1991: xxxvii).

However, what we understand by ‘the political’ or ‘politics’ is contested in academic literature and, at times, confusing. Therefore, before we explore further the ethnography of Syntagma Square and the insights this can bring to the debate on the dialectic between politics and space, it is necessary to clarify the ways in which we employ the terms *political*, *politics* and *police* and use them as the background to our analysis of the dialectic between politics and space in this paper.

For a number of contemporary authors who drive the proliferating debate on politics and the post-political, *politics* is not what conventional political science understands as its ‘object’ of inquiry, that is, the ensemble of practices, processes, discourses and institutions of a specific constituted political order (parties, legislative bodies, etc.). Instead, any form of politics moves beyond ‘the locus of [existing] power relations’ (Nancy, 1991: xxxvii), and implies the questioning of instituted ensembles and practices. *The political* proper calls into question the very structuring principles of the established order (Žižek, 1991), and entails the production of new social imaginaries and new institutions (Castoriadis, 1987). The inherently antagonistic dimension of human relations is central in generating the political (Marchart, 2007; Mouffe, 2005; Stavrakakis, 1999, 2007b) as ‘the place where community as such is brought into play’ (Nancy, 1991: xxxvii). Rancière adopts a similar understanding of *the political* (for an overview of the argument, see May, 2008), but also attempts to explain what accounts for the contemporary closure of *the political* by introducing the notion of *the police*. For Rancière *the police* is the ensemble of practices associated with the institutionalization of the social: ‘an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise’ (Rancière,

1999: 29). *The police* evolves around ‘all the activities which create order by distributing places, names, functions’ (Rancière, 1994: 173) or what Rancière calls the ‘partition of the sensible’ (Rancière, 2001: 8).

Politics, then, becomes the point where the police and the political meet (Swyngedouw, 2011b: 376); the disruptive engagement with the police order, revolving around ‘the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time’ (Rancière, 2006b: 13). Rancière defines political activity in deeply spatial terms. It is ‘whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place’s destination. It makes visible what had no business being seen, and ... makes understood as discourse what was once only heard as noise’ (Rancière, 1999: 30). In this sense, politics involves ‘prod[ing] the spatiality that permits exercising [the] right [to speak]’ (Swyngedouw, 2011b: 376). *Politics*, therefore, evolves around the production of ‘dissensual spaces’ (Swyngedouw, 2011b: 376) that can become hosts for ‘voicing speech that claims a place in the order of things, demanding “the part for those who have no part”’ (Swyngedouw, 2011b: 375).

Margaret Kohn also emphasizes the link between the spatial and the political, by arguing that ‘space is not just a tool for social control (...) spatial practices can contribute to transformative politics. All political groups – government and opposition, right and left, fascist and democratic – use space, just as they employ language, symbols, ideas and incentives’ (Kohn, 2003: 7). Politicization cannot be isolated from spatial representation: political antagonisms and conflicts are always articulated in and through spaces (Lefebvre, 1991: 365). In staging dissent, such spaces become political in the sense that they ‘modify the map of what can be thought, what can be named and perceived’ (Rancière in Levy et al., 2007: 4; quoted in Swyngedouw, 2007: 72).

However, staging dissent alone does not constitute *politics*. Rancière reserves the term *politics* for practices that evolve around the democratic presupposition of equality. The Indignants (αγανακτισμένοι) of Athens’ Syntagma Square has been depicted as a key moment of staging dissent in contemporary politics (Douzinas, 2011, 2013; Kioupiolis, 2011; Korzi and Vradsis, 2012). But to what extent have

these produced spaces of dissent become ‘the meeting point of the police and the political’ (Swyngedouw, 2011b: 376) that Rancière defines as politics? How far did the Indignant Squares go beyond staging dissent and into becoming properly political spaces, that is, spaces that modified ‘the map of what can be thought, ... named and perceived’ (Rancière in Levy, 2007: 4; quoted in Swyngedouw, 2007: 72)? To what extent did they produce a spatiality that offered the right to speak to those whose voice was only recognized as noise (see also Madden and Vradsis, 2012; Merrifield, 2011, 2012; Smith, 2013).

Following Rancière’s suggestion that politics arises through the ‘disruption of [the] order of (...) the police’ (Rancière, 1999: 99), in the following section we chart the spatial and discursive choreographies of Syntagma square in order to analyse the extent to which the events at Syntagma square moved from indignation to a spatialization of politics.

## The spatialization of opposing political imaginaries

### *The socio-spatial police ordering of Athens*

The crack in the mirror of general consensus that the Syntagma square occupation dealt can only be understood if seen against the backdrop of the specific police ordering of the Athenian centre in the years that preceded the crisis. Since the mid-1990s the privatization of public land had transformed what used to be public spaces into private niches catering for global tourism and international capital. The process of urban restructuring reached its climax during the period leading up to the 2004 Olympiad, which was held at Athens (Gospodini, 2009; Leontidou, 2010). The predominance of retail and the service sector, the commission of new architectural ‘icons’ by banks, department stores and global chain stores in expensive neighbourhoods accounted for an intensive privatization and commodification of the Athenian urban space (Petropoulou, 2008). The transformation of the Athenian landscape was accompanied by the establishment of practices of ‘surveillance-induced social control, which in turn became absorbed into the

citizens' stock of social values' (Petropoulou, 2010: 218; see also Leontidou et al., 2008). The new spaces that emerged out of this process and became the symbols of a new set of power relations (Stavrvides, 2008) are today the remnants of the utopian vision for glamour and enjoyment that followed Athens' successful Olympic bid in 2004 (Afouxenidis, 2006; Petropoulou, 2010). At the aftermath of the games, the Athenian urban fabric – notably the city centre – became a more than ever polarized space, where islands of extreme wealth and power are interspersed with places of deprivation, exclusion and poverty (Kaika, 2012; Kavoulakos, 2013; Noussia and Lyons, 2009; Petropoulou, 2008, 2010; see also Swyngedouw and Kaika, 2003). At the same time, the Athenian city centre also became the site of violent insurgencies (Stavrakakis, 2007a, 2007b; Swyngedouw, 2011b: 377) that peaked with the December 2008 riots, which followed the killing of 15-year-old Alexis Grigoropoulos by a police officer (Dalakoglou and Vradis, 2011). For Vradis, the December 2008 riots constituted a prelude to the 'breach of the spatial contract' that the occupation of Syntagma Square attempted, by instituting forms of public protest that moved beyond established political practices (2013).

It is within this specific socio-spatial police ordering, and not simply within the context of an intense economic and political crisis, that the Indignant Squares movement emerged in Greece. The first large gathering at Syntagma Square took place on Wednesday 25 May 2011 – 10 days after the occupation of Puerta del Sol in Madrid by the *Indignados*. This was at the aftermath of the proposition for a set of draconian austerity measures (for an analysis of the hegemonic politics around the Greek Crisis from a geographical perspective, see Hadjimichalis, 2011). The call for gathering in Syntagma Square a-lá Tahrir Square and Puerta del Sol was launched through a social media page that quickly gained popular support, counting more than a thousand new members per hour (see also *To Vima*, 2011a). Similar initiatives proliferated in several Greek cities. The unknown social media administrators were calling for peaceful demonstrations that would keep out political party insignias, party banners and party slogans. The only banners allowed would be national

Greek flags and everyone should participate as an individual and not as a member of a wider political group of any kind (Indignants, 2011). The people's gathering in Syntagma Square was baptized *Αγανακτισμένοι* (the Indignants), paying homage to the Spanish initiative, and directly referring to the pamphlet *Indignez Vous!* penned by French Resistance elder Stéphane Hessel (2010). The early social media messages posted by the Syntagma Indignants leave no doubt that anger and indignation provided the spark for gatherings and protests. As Jean-Luc Nancy put it in the early 1990s:

Anger is the political sentiment par excellence. It brings out the qualities of the inadmissible, the intolerable. It is a refusal and a resistance that with one step goes beyond all that can be accomplished reasonably in order to open possible paths for a new negotiation of the reasonable but also paths of an uncompromising vigilance. (Nancy, 1992: 375)

In the days that followed, the Indignant protests in Athens evolved into a massive – although in no sense homogeneous – staging of popular dissatisfaction and anger against the so-called 'Greek Crisis' (Douzinas, 2013; Korizi and Vradis, 2012). On certain dates, the gatherings would attract up to 200,000 people on the Square and the surrounding streets. Over several weeks – up until early July 2011 – thousands of people emerged out of the anonymity of everyday urban life, and staged their presence (Arendt, 1998) in re-appropriating public spaces in and around Syntagma Square, which, up until then were occupied mainly by tourists and the nearby cafes and restaurants. The emerging crowds claimed the square as a stage to 'enunciate their dissent towards the hegemonic crisis politics which at the same time were effacing democracy' (Popular Assembly Vote (PAV), 2011c). The occupation of Syntagma Square continued despite brutal repression by police forces on several occasions and most notably on the 15, 28 and 29 June 2011 (Korizi and Vradis, 2012).

However, as more people gathered, a topographic differentiation started forming within the square itself. Two distinct sets of practices and slogans emerged that differentiated the 'upper' part of the square, namely the elongated



pedestrian area directly facing the Greek Parliament building, from the 'lower' part of the square, accessible from the upper part via an amphitheatrically arranged marble staircase. The lower square constitutes the larger landscaped part of Syntagma square proper, and does not have direct visual contact with the entrance level of the parliament building. During the early days of the protests, the 'upper' square emerged as the *par excellence* space for expressing dissent towards Members of the Parliament. The direct visual contact that this part of the square has with the entrance level of the parliament building made it the perfect stage for those who wanted to launch direct verbal abuse and obscene gesticulations against Members of Parliament (MPs). Soon, however, the target of verbal abuse of some of the people gathering in this part of the square expanded to minority groups and migrants. The 'lower square', by contrast, soon became a space that harboured more organized efforts to articulate a voice beyond dissent with the institution of a 'popular assembly' with regular meetings, the launch of a blog and twitter accounts, and the organization of collective food supplies, temporary accommodation and emergency medical aid centre. Therefore, although both the upper and the lower square gatherings constituted part of the Syntagma Indignant Square political event, each part ended up expressing opposing imaginaries for the future. Despite the existence of a certain degree of permeability between the participants in the two squares, the dominant discursive and material practices that were articulated in each part of the square evolved in quite distinct ways. Still, on the days when the square gatherings grew into massive protests (as was the case on general strike days, and/or during Parliament ballots on the implementation of austerity measures), and the numbers of people on and around the square built up to hundreds of thousands, the partition between the two parts of the square became extremely porous. On such days, thousands of protesters were continuously crossing over from one part of the square to the other, tearing down the symbolic boundary between the two squares, and marginalizing the groups that were voicing xenophobic discourses in the upper square.

### 'Upper square': Jobs for Greeks! Not for foreigners!

During the first couple of days, the gathering in Syntagma square was a *melange* of people from different occupational backgrounds, social status, age and political belief, all united by the desire to express discontent. In that sense, beyond personal anger and indignation, there was no clear political or other message emanating from the square. Characteristically, when the members of the workers' union of the public electricity company (who were on strike) entered the square to demonstrate, they were spontaneously booed, and accused of hijacking the square for demonstrating as union members and not as individuals (Kyriakopoulos, 2011). The prevailing attitude uniting all involved was that all politicians were corrupt thieves and since workers' unions were affiliated to political parties, they too had no place in the square that should stay clear of party politics. In a nutshell, any ideological connotation beyond the unity of indignation was unwelcome in Syntagma square. Interestingly, during the early days of protest, the hegemonic media and political elites were uncharacteristically sympathetic to the Syntagma Indignants; they provided wide coverage of the gatherings and congratulations for 'the most peaceful demonstrations in months!' (*To Vima*, 2011b), but advised them to keep the gatherings apolitical, non-ideological and non-violent (see, for example, *Skai*, 2011; *To Vima*, 2011b). During the whole period, the area between the square and the Parliament was heavily guarded by several rows of riot police in full gear.

Throughout May and June 2011, the Square continued to be occupied by protesters whose numbers and energy levels were directly dependent on the Parliamentary activities of the day in relation to the pending austerity measures. As noted earlier, the upper part of the square became the key niche for launching direct protests against MPs. People from all socio-economic, cultural and political backgrounds, united by despair over the economic crisis that permeated Greek society (Gourgouris, 2011), would visit the upper square to hurl anathema to their elected representatives at the opposite side of the road. With the dominant cry being 'Thieves!' or 'Burn this brothel of a Parliament!', protests in the upper square often took the form of collective moans,

verbal abuse and obscene gesticulating against the walls of the Parliament.

However, apart from anger and indignation, two additional elements soon emerged and attempted to hegemonize the discourse of the upper square. Firstly, the belief that the crisis was the outcome of recent corrupt political practices, which could be traced directly (and solely) to serving MPs. Secondly, the conviction that, despite it being the making of a few corrupt politicians, the crisis was threatening the Greek nation as a whole, and therefore could be an element that would unite the nation, like no other social or political ideologies could. Here, it was ‘the Greek people’ against ‘corrupt politicians’. National unity and salvation could only be achieved through a ‘properly Greek’ anti-cleptocratic government that would imprison the traitors and restore national pride (Sevastakis, 2011b, 2011d).

Yet, the politics of this renunciation did not go beyond expressing collective indignation through cursing and shouting, and although it may have accurately expressed the breadth of indignation across the country, it is fair to say that it remained noise. It was a collective moaning and desperation against the loss of the continuous enjoyment that was collectively promised at the mass publicly organized festivities at the very same Syntagma Square in 2004, when Greece won the European Football Cup, and awaited the climax of glamour that the 2004 Olympic Games would bring (Sevastakis, 2011d).

However, the element that united the upper square, that is, the imaginary of an innocent Greek public, who was fooled by a bunch of corrupt politicians, also became the locus for nurturing reactionary politics within the same space. A number of nationalist groups, carrying Greek flags, made recurring attempts to re-appropriate Syntagma’s upper square as a gathering for Greeks only. Right from the first day of the protests a group called ‘300 Greeks’ made its presence known and attempted to hegemonize a nationalist rhetoric around the Indignants movement. Celebrating the massive gathering of 25 May, the group issued a pamphlet that read:

All Greeks have become a fist that will attack the underbelly of the new world order. We feel proud about

each other. The 300 Greeks will stay here guarding the square, 24 hours a day, the same way the 300 Spartans once guarded Thermopylae. (300Greeks, 2011b)

According to its organizers the group’s demand for a referendum in favour of reassessing the terms of repayment of the Greek debt enjoyed the support of over 100,000 people who signed the relevant petition (300Greeks, 2011a). In their subsequent letters to the Greek Parliament and to the president of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso, the group articulated a similar nationalistic rhetoric:

We, the people of Greece can no longer tolerate this irrational and damaging state of affairs. This is why we demand a referendum. We consider that the Greek government is no longer capable of adequately representing the Greek people the way they should. We also think that those who have led our country to the current state of affairs should be held accountable and punished. While we are willing to repay what we owe others (after proving that it is legal debt), we shall not allow Greece to fail. As the cradle of western civilization, Greece cannot fail. (300Greeks, 2011a)

In parallel, a group named ‘The Greek Mothers’ also featured prominently in the upper square and in the mass media. ‘The Greek Mothers’ carried banners demanding: ‘Jobs for Our Children, not for Foreigners’. To ‘Greek Mothers’, immigrants were mainly to blame both for the country’s increasing unemployment rates, and for the increasing crime rates in the streets of Athens (Greek Mothers, 2011). The following excerpts from their letter to Syntagma’s popular assembly are indicative of the nationalist and xenophobic spirit that was articulated in the upper square:

The dire situation our country is in, dictates that only Greeks with pure national ideology can rescue her [Greece]. Half-hearted statements will not do. Greece’s problem is not economic. It is national. (...) We were told that being a ‘nationalist’ is a bad thing ... It is fanaticism; it is wickedness against the ‘poor illegal-immigrants’! But I am Greek! And therefore I am a Nationalist! I am a Patriot! I do not belong to any party except to GREECE! I was not born and bred to hate, but I can not ignore my enemies either! (...) All I care for is to be able to tell my children ... that I did not quit;



I did not sit back comfortably letting incompetent individuals decide the future of Greece's children; I was there, fighting for [my children] to have the future they rightfully deserve!!! (Greek Mothers, 2011)

It is important to note here that the nationalist rhetoric of the upper square cut across the political spectrum. Left-leaning nationalist groups were also present, most notably 'Spitha', an initiative led by Mikis Theodorakis, famous Greek composer and emblematic figure of the struggle against the 1967–1974 military dictatorship. In an article detailing Spitha's strategic orientation, George Karampelias summarized the group's demands:

- The occupation government should leave the country.
- Greece should abolish the memorandum, resort to a referendum, and negotiate from scratch the terms of its loan, in order to drastically reduce the debt, recognize German reparations and put in place a new development model.
- Greece should exercise an independent foreign policy delimitate an Exclusive Trading Zone and sign agreements with countries only as dictated by national interest. (Karampelias, 2011)

Similar claims and logics were echoed in the rhetoric of the call for the formation of a nationalist left-wing group, under the name 'United Popular Front'. During the high days of the occupation of Syntagma Square, Dimitris Kazakis (2011), who appeared as one of the group's leaders, gave a long talk in Syntagma Square and was subsequently invited to similar panels across the country.

Despite the nationalist and xenophobic claims that were articulated in the upper square, the Neo-Nazi political party 'Golden Dawn' were absent from the Indignant Squares. As Liakos notes 'during these days, Golden Dawn was not in Syntagma Square; they were busy chasing and abusing immigrants [in the streets of Athens]' (2012: no page number). They once attempted to approach the square as a group, but were repulsed by the people, who remained loyal to the motto 'no political parties – no party banners' that was common for both the upper and the lower square. Through

participant observation, it was difficult to assess whether the nationalistic and xenophobic discourses that emerged in the upper square were condoned by every single participant in that part of the square. The majority of the participants seemed to be attracted mainly by the ritualistic renunciation of political parties and political elites. What is certain, however, is that whilst racist violence in the streets of Athens was escalating, xenophobic incidents in the upper square increased, and tension amongst the protesters of the lower and the upper square grew heavier (Popular Assembly Minutes (PAM), 2011) and crystallized in the separation of the square in two distinct parts.

### *'Lower square': Real democracy now!*

At the lower part of Syntagma square, the first chaotic days of protest soon gave way to a series of organized efforts to articulate a more coherent political voice and to better synchronize collective action, through the formation of specific action groups in different parts of the square. Amongst these, a media group provided daily press releases and content and updates for the movement's website ([www.real-democracy.gr](http://www.real-democracy.gr))<sup>2</sup>; a web radio was providing continuous live streaming for the proceedings of the square; and a translation centre for non-Greek visitors, activists and foreign media correspondents was continuously populated (Gourgouris, 2011; PAV, 2011a, 2011e).

The formation of the collectives at the lower square remained committed to not being affiliated with political parties. Members of progressive political parties and groups were allowed to participate only as individuals, and only if they were not carrying party banners and were not launching party slogans. Although banning political party insignia or discourse would sound either awkward or normalized within different geographical contexts, in the context of Greek politics, where the non-governmental organization (NGO) sector is still nascent, and political parties have traditionally been the key mechanism for articulating political dissent, the banning of political parties from mass protests was an extraordinary and unprecedented phenomenon.

As an increasing number of people were spending significant amounts of time in the square (many of

them coming from areas outside the city centre), setting up collective practices of self-organization also became imperative for sustaining the momentum of the gatherings: a solidarity kitchen, clothes exchange, toilets, garbage collection, a first-aid station and informal hospital at the entrance of Syntagma metro station were set up by the protesters in the lower square. A neighbourhood organization centre was coordinating actions that would reach beyond the squares and in different parts of the city. A performing arts centre provided an outlet for expression and collective action.

Most importantly, however, participants at the lower square set up an Open Popular Assembly Forum, where every evening people on the square took turns in developing their positions, each allowed a minute and a half to speak – the measure serving as a guardian against demagoguery (Douzinas, 2011; Gourgouris, 2011). This was a conscious attempt to institute democratic procedures and therefore it is not surprising that the demand for *real and direct democracy* became the key slogan/signifier around which the discussions in the square's general assembly were articulated (PAV, 2011c). The term *direct democracy* deliberately encapsulates a double reference: the demand for democracy here and now and the demand for democracy in an unmediated fashion (Kioupkiolis, 2011).

The gathering of the anonymous majority, through direct participation and the use of communication technologies, created material and virtual public spaces with no unified or specified programme. These spaces were porous, and spontaneous, free from entrenched power structures, leaders and exclusive identifications; they interacted in networked structures, where multiple and interchangeable actors participated in the genesis and development of joint actions (Kioupkiolis, 2011). In that sense, we can argue that, although fragmented and contradictory, a self-cognizant process of political subjectivation was in the making in the lower square (Sevastakis, 2011b). Although indignation against corruption and austerity measures emerged here as centrally as it did in the upper part of the square, nevertheless, the key focus went beyond a mere protest against the socio-economic strangulation of the

country, and a demand for radical change of Greek political institutions, practices and culture started emerging as a (noisy) discourse; a demand for emancipation from the existing socio-spatial order. Indeed, the Popular Assembly repeatedly voted and made known via its website and social media that even if the Greek government were to stand up against the debilitating terms of the austerity measures, the Indignants would not vacate Syntagma Square until their goal for emancipation from current political institutions was achieved (PAV, 2011b, 2011c, 2011d).

Operating within a context of increasing de-territorialization of political and economic power to international financial markets and rating agencies, the lower Syntagma Indignant Square succeeded in conveying two important messages. Firstly, it articulated a strong demand for reinstating processes of direct democracy, and for universalizing democratic politics (Kioupkiolis, 2011; Rancière, 2006a; Rogkas, 2011). Secondly, it introduced new modes for re-(de)territorializing democratic politics: although spatially rooted in the square, the indignants were associated with an international movement, and their actions were intertwined with events across the globe. These practices 'have preserved a nomadic de-territorialisation to the extent that they [were] opening virtual and material spaces' (Kioupkiolis, 2011: 9). The mobilization of social media and communication technologies for internal organization and external circulation of ideas (live streaming popular assembly meetings, circulating information, furthering discussions that have been developed within the assembly, etc.) opened up the possibility for participation and for unexpected and anonymous interventions.<sup>3</sup> Thirdly, the noise that occasionally turned into debate amongst equals in the square forged 'a political ethos that promotes agonistic interconnection among equals' (Kioupkiolis, 2011: 9). This was one of the most promising signals that the Indignant Squares sent across the world.

In this sense, the discourse emanating from the lower square's General Assembly can be read as an attempt to institute a form of democratic politics, albeit partial and fragmented; as an emancipatory struggle, wherein people took 'the right to their

own time and their own place' (Swyngedouw, 2011b: 375), to collectively, think and organize the spatialities of their political practices, to occupy and re-appropriate Syntagma Square from its allocation within the 'late capitalist post-political spatiality' (Swyngedouw, 2011b: 378). Syntagma Square could be seen as an arena where the originally populist and chaotic noise, or the fundamentalist discourses of the *ochlos* (Sevastakis, 2011a, 2011b), entered a process of becoming a more articulate political voice (Rancière, 1999, 2001). It was a public affair, unfolding both materially and symbolically in and through space, redefining the boundaries of the police ordering of public space and re-imagining socio-spatial relations (see *The spatialization of opposing political imaginaries* section; see also May, 2008; Rancière, 1999; Swyngedouw, 2011a, 2011b). Whilst the efforts to articulate a more coherent political imaginary involved a certain element of closure, at the same time they opened up new possibilities for political action and practice. The performative and spatialized practices of the lower square constituted a public staging of equality 'where liberty and equality [were] no longer (...) represented in the institutions of law and state, but [were] embodied in the very forms of concrete life and sensible experience' (Rancière, 2006a: 3).

However, the heterogeneity and open democratic procedures that became the lower square's biggest strength were also its key weakness. The engagement of large sections of the middle strata in the Square's event increased its heterogeneity and made ideological identifications and political aims increasingly difficult to articulate (Sevastakis, 2011b). Indeed, in earlier contemporary incarnations of the 'multitude' of Greek politics (e.g. August 2007 protests) the 'scepticism and frustration towards institutionalized polic(y)ing, allowed [a critical mass of post-democratic citizens] to coexist ... with anarchist ideology ... and [with] the socially marginalized' (Kioupkiolis, 2011: 8). However, at the lower Syntagma square, whilst struggling to articulate a radical progressive political imaginary and institute proper collective practices, this coexistence was hard – if possible – to maintain (Kioupkiolis, 2011).

### **Conclusion: the significance and limitation of indignation in instituting a broader democratic politics**

The massive protests of 28 and 29 June 2011 against the backdrop of the Parliamentary discussion and vote on the Greek austerity measures constituted the last major event at both Syntagma Squares: upper and lower. The Parliamentary approval of the austerity measures, combined with the violent disbanding of protesters through tear gas and vicious riot police action (15 June, 28–29 June 2011) significantly reduced the number of participants, through a combination of fear and resignation (Leontidou, 2012). Yet, the gatherings at Syntagma Square continued up until the end of July. What was left of the collective organizational infrastructure at the lower square was 'cleared away' by municipal police on 30 July 2011 (Korizi and Vradis, 2012; Sevastakis, 2011c). Subsequent efforts, mainly on the part of political parties and political movements to reinvigorate the Indignant Squares never succeeded to mobilize the numbers involved over May and June 2011. Despite the initiation of a series of popular assemblies and neighbourhood movements in the aftermath of the Indignant Squares (Korizi and Vradis, 2012), the mass character of the initial gatherings withered away.

Nevertheless, the protests at Syntagma succeeded not only in expressing dissent, but also in imagining and materializing alternative ways of being, doing and saying in common. The performative staging of equality in the lower square, the daily meetings of the popular assembly and the collective self-organization practices constituted a spatialization of an imaginary of *égalité*. By introducing and nurturing a nomadic re-territorialization of democratic politics and an agonistic ethos of collective self-management, the lower square conveyed valuable new elements for democratic politics. Indeed, the new generation of activists with a heightened experience in democratic practices and an international outlook (Graeber, 2002), as well as the social initiatives that burgeoned in Greece at the aftermath of the Syntagma square protests (alternative currencies, time banks, consumers' cooperatives, social groceries, social medical centres, etc.) are practices and

spaces of being in common that were inspired and strengthened by the spirit instituted in the lower Syntagma Square (Hadjimichalis, 2013). In addition, as new social needs proliferate, from energy poverty to homelessness, new spaces of being in common emerge.

However, these new spaces remain by necessity closely focused on the particular and often localized social need they tend to, be that homelessness, hunger, medical care, energy poverty, etc. In that sense, they remain loyal to Syntagma Square's call to institute practices that move beyond the temporalities and spatialities of the police order, but they do not (and could not) tend to the lower square's call for institutionalizing a more compound democratic practice and a broader democratic space.

Therefore, although the legacy of the lower Syntagma Square inspired the proliferation of numerous well-focused social initiatives, the lower square's practices failed to evolve into a broader, more compound practice for democratic politics once the protests came to an end. By remaining localized and issue-focused, the social initiatives that constitute the legacy of the Indignant Squares movement made the movement vulnerable to criticism over generating yet another set of 'parochialist politics' that, according to David Harvey, can at times perpetuate social relations of domination, and can therefore potentially be profoundly conservative (Harvey, 1996: 324). We argue that it is precisely this failure to generate more compound, non-localized democratic practices that would endure beyond the square's temporal and spatial practices that fuelled critics who labelled the Indignant Squares protests as 'post-political'.

True: if judged only by the extent to which they succeeded or not in revolutionizing what we call 'democratic politics', the protests at Syntagma and beyond did indeed fail, as they remained at the level of the carnivalesque; a big urban feast that created a momentarily illusion of a larger community congealing around the need to oppose the loss of a promised enjoyment. However, if the Indignant Squares are judged (as, we argue, they should be) by the broader impact they had in kindling imaginaries and practices of acting beyond the temporalities and spatialities of the police order, then, there is no doubt: the

Indignant Squares did carry the day. They gave rise to new social spaces and groomed a new generation of activists with a heightened sense of political consciousness (Staehele and Nagel, 2013). Seen within this framework, the 'failure' of the protests to institute more compound forms of democratic politics does nothing but assert precisely that 'events that punctuate the flow' cannot be expressed only through strikes or demonstrations (Rancière, 2011: 80). A new radical political imaginary (Castoriadis, 1987; Kaika, 2011) can only be produced through persistent and 'ongoing efforts to create forms of being in common different from the ones offered from the state, [or] the democratic consensus' (Rancière, 2011: 80). It is precisely such new ways of being in common, however fragmented, that we experience in Greece and across the world at the aftermath of the Indignants' protests. The now omnipresent social medical centres, homeless support networks, social groceries and free communal meals constitute the legacy of the Indignant Squares; they lie outside established state practices and contribute towards a continuous institutionalization, in the here and the now, of new radical imaginaries.

By outlining the legacy, alongside the limitations and internal contradictions of the Indignant Squares events, the article highlights the need to engage in a finer grained qualitative analysis that moves beyond deifying or demonizing the squares. We need an analysis that better documents and understands the potential of the legacy of the Indignant Squares to act as a precursor to a broader democratic change (Taibo, 2013). We argue that it is important to outline the internal contradictions and limitations of this legacy, alongside its strengths, as these contradictions and limitations stand witnesses to the fact that a struggle for emancipation that moves beyond expressing dissent requires rigorous, continuous and organized efforts to construct conceptual, affective and material democratic spaces (Stavrakakis, 2011: 8). Compounding these spaces into a broader practice of democratic politics is a matter of continuous and persistent struggle and effort.

## Notes

1. In describing the movement, the term Indignants has been favoured by mainstream media and participants

in the 'upper square', while the 'lower square' activists and popular assembly members favoured the term the movement of the squares. The rest of the paper will refer to the movement as 'Indignant Squares' in an effort to capture both the element of anger and indignation that has been central for the mobilization as well as its spatial articulations and connotations.

2. The movement's website as well as the online archive of its votes and the minutes of the popular assembly have now been removed from the web by its administrators.
3. For a discussion on the mobilization of social media and communication technologies, see also Merrifield (2011).

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