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Chapter 8

The square as the place of the commons

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Introduction

Squares have always been a distinctive feature of the city. They form the centre of gravity of urban life and have been of paramount importance for social interaction through different times and across a variety of cultures.¹ As Cutini (2014: 248) states, 'A square is a public open living space, the meeting and relation space par excellence, where people do meet and gather day by day'. In the Italian language, Cutini explains, various expressions evoke the square as a symbol for the people: 'to go down to the square' means to revolt, and 'to listen to the square' means to sound out public opinion, so even in everyday speech the square becomes 'the physical representation of its community meaning'. The square is the place where public life is concentrated and social value is created.

All kinds of encounters can occur on the square, often at the same time. It is a place to meet and to converse, to buy, to protest, to feast or watch a spectacle, to be lazy, to flirt, to drink and to play or just to wander about. It operates as a site of contestation and transformation, a place where institutions are confronted, new forms of organising emerge and hierarchical power structures are rearranged. The square has this potential because it is an open, delineated but inherently undefined urban space. The square is an empty place in the city, a white spot on the map

simultaneously incorporating all colours. It is, therefore, a place where anything can happen and anyone can reside. Its very multipurposeness is what makes the square a common space for everybody and therefore a place where a sense of community can arise. Squares embody communality. They are the locality of the commons and represent a space that cannot be exclusively appropriated, because this space is open to the public.

In this chapter, we want to demonstrate the openness of the square as an embodiment of the commons. The spatial features of the square – its accessibility, centrality and emptiness – make it inviting for a variety of people and activities. Squares allow for a multiplicity of manifestations of togetherness without requiring these to be forced into any one definition. The square is the place to be singular–plural, in the words of Jean Luc Nancy (2000). This allows for the emergence of spontaneous and transient communities in which an awareness of shared interests is expressed. Our analysis of the square as the place for community focuses mainly on the writings of Jean Luc Nancy since, we believe, he presents a novel way of analysing the social that is of particular interest when dealing with pluriformity.

Besides being the place of fairs and festivals, squares all over the world have a history of protest and repression. The public (re)claims the square, one might say, in oppositional acts of political performance, directed against central power. Our analysis of the square therefore implies an analysis of struggle between attempts to control the square and the contestation of the disempowered. In recent years we have seen a striking rise of protests against anti-democratic, neoliberal and capitalist economic structures and political governance characterised by gatherings on the square as their focal point (Lopes de Souza & Lipietz, 2011; Dhaliwal,

2012; Schiffman et al., 2012; Stavrides, 2012; Marom, 2013; Örs, 2014). On the square, people experiment with new forms of real and direct democracy; the square becomes the space in which the concept of the commons is actualised.

An open space in the city

When wandering through a city, one often ends up at a square – sometimes accidentally, but very often intentionally, since cities are largely known by their squares (Cutini, 2014: 248). Indeed, as Moughtin (2003: 90) explains, it is typically ‘only when the main square of most old towns is reached that one has really “arrived”, because ‘all the streets lead naturally to this focal point’ which ‘dominates the town in size and grandeur’ and ultimately ‘gives meaning to its existence as a place distinct from other places’. The square is a fissure in the city, where the dense construction of buildings cracks open (e.g. the Piazza del Campo in Siena). In cities built according to an Italian Renaissance design, the main square is located right in the geometric centre of the settlement, complemented by a number of smaller squares scattered around (Cutini, 2014: 253).

In modern cities, squares function as traffic nodes, and important public buildings are often grouped around the square (Moughtin, 2003: 93). Also, in cities with a more modern urban design, squares are often a central place for social interactions. These light and open spaces are attractive places to meet, since spatiality is an important aspect of social traffic. Interactions do not take place in a void. The *topos* where we meet influences the character of the interaction, so we tend to prefer a place that fits the encounter. Which interests (should) play a part in the meeting? Who is allowed to set the parameters and who should adapt

to the situation? Do we invite the other over to our terrain? Who is the guest and who is the host? Such questions are resolved by the neutrality of public spaces, sites without private ownership, which are accessible to all and therefore facilitate more symmetrical relations. Squares are places that can be temporarily used by anyone.

Although in English the name is 'square' – even when they obviously are not always square (e.g. Times Square, in New York) – in almost every other Western language they are just called 'places':² *place* in French (Place de la Concorde, Paris, for a while the Place de la Révolution), *Platz* in German (Potsdamer Platz, Berlin), *plaza* in Spanish (Plaza Mayor, Madrid), *piazza* in Italian (Piazza Navona, Rome). The Dutch word *plein* is derived from the Latin *planum*, as in the English 'plane' and 'plain', signifying a flat space without any particular content (Het Plein in the Hague does not even need a specific name). However, as Heidegger (1971: 141 ff.) explained, a place is the location of something, a thing, a person. It is a distinguishable position in the vastness of the world, a location, as opposed to the indistinctiveness of empty space. A place indicates an opening to a labyrinth of possibilities. Heidegger gives the example of a bridge. Along the shores of the river many points may be indicated that could be occupied by something. One of these points becomes recognisable as a place because of the bridge; it becomes a place because the bridge leads to it. A place is always the place of something. The essentially empty space of a square becomes a place in relation to its use by the people and in relation to its surroundings.

Socioculturally, the square indicates the place within the city where community can be actualised. This location thus becomes

a locality, allowing for different kinds of use and different forms of appropriation by different people. Mattias Kärholm (2005) speaks of the 'territorial complexity' that is generated in the square. Various groups of people develop a certain personal relationship with a place, because of the way they identify with and use it. Simultaneously, top-down, planned and impersonal territorial strategies are enacted to delimit or control it. It is symptomatic of this that most redesigned modern squares are ordered spaces, sectioned into units, each with its own purpose, even when designed for the relaxation of citizens, as is the case with numerous squares that have been reclaimed from traffic (Gehl & Gamzoe, 2006). Nevertheless, people tend to appropriate such ordered spaces in unexpected ways. The use of the square by buskers and homeless people are examples, which are consequently regularised in response. It is this constant interplay of territorial tactics and strategies, formal and informal markings of a place, exercised by a variety of groups and actors, which leads to the territorial complexity. Squares are characterised by a complex interplay of different power struggles, different uses and people. Unlike, for example, shopping malls, which are regulated spaces designed with one form of use and activity in mind, there is not a single territorial strategy dominating the square (Kärholm, 2005: 16).

Physically, the empty space of the square becomes a locality through the contrast with its surroundings. The large buildings around the square, the shops and cafés with terraces, perhaps a town hall, often a church or cathedral at the head (see below), define the square because they attract visitors (e.g. the Grote Markt/Grand Place, in Brussels). Hence, paradoxically, the limits to the open space of the square define its inviting character. The

buildings around the square both guard it and keep it together. An equilibrium is needed, however, between the central open space of the square and the surrounding urban texture that defines it. There is a delicate balance between a space that is open to all and a limitless, impersonal expanse. The former is cosy and invites one to dwell in it; the latter overwhelms and disorients us.

The atmosphere of the square takes shape in the interplay between the open space and the buildings on the periphery. Urban designers have researched the ideal physical features of the public square, taking into account aspects such as solar access, wind flow, thermal comfort, noise and pedestrian movement (Giddings, Charlton & Horne, 2011). Architects have discovered an ideal relationship between the height of the surrounding buildings and the sides of the square (Moughtin, 2003: 100) – which, unsurprisingly, is $1/3:2/3$, the Golden Ratio. If the adjacent buildings are too high, the square becomes pompous and authoritarian; it makes us feel small and insignificant (as at Potsdamer Platz). If they are too low or the surroundings are too open, the communal space becomes an anonymous place (like the Plaza de la Revolucion in Havana); people tend to feel lost in the vastness of the space if there are no protecting boundaries (such as the Praça dos Três Poderes in Brasília).

Historically, early urban settlements tended to feature an open, common place in a closed, built environment. This early incarnation or forerunner of the modern city square was of great importance to the community for protection. In castles located in rural settings, as well as in walled cities, there was an open space left within the tight fabric of buildings, where peasants and their animals could enter and seek shelter in case of attack. The inhabitants of the neighbouring countryside were brought inside

the walls when the enemy was approaching. Since walled cities could not expand outside the walls, they grew inside. The medieval city became a dense maze, with every inch utilised. Despite the lack of space, however, areas were left unoccupied in order to accommodate large crowds of people. In these places, people gathered for common purpose. During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, squares were used for commercial purposes, as marketplaces, as well as for public festivities and executions.

Nowadays, as through the centuries, the square occupies the metaphorical and, often enough, still literal centre of the city for its populace, the physical siting of the urban cultural communal. It forms a spatial opening where public encounters can take place, surrounded by the dense tissue of private places in streets and alleyways, nooks and crannies that can be easily appropriated. It is this contrast between the darkness and secrecy of the niches in between houses, and the wide openness and light of the square that makes the latter so attractive. In the square, the gaze is free and horizontal. The square is therefore a place of light, where one can see the other in reciprocity. There are no hiding places in the middle of the square, and there are no vantage points where one can observe without being seen. In the square, the gaze is democratic and egalitarian – it therefore contests power structures of discipline and control. The square takes a political stance inherent in its sociocultural, physical and historical positioning.

As explained by Foucault (1991), disciplinary power works through an asymmetric gaze, by seeing without being seen and in this way attaining control over subjects who are exposed, as objects – while the centre of power, from whence the gaze emanates, remains hidden. Because of its openness and accessibility, the square can facilitate different relationships of power.

In contrast to hierarchical, asymmetric power production, the power of the commons is exercised on the square in the open horizontal gaze of its users. They qualify to share in power through their embodied presence. Literally and physically, those who meet on the square stand on the same level, all exposed to one another. This horizontality and equality comprises a crucial, defining feature of the commons.

The place of the commons and community

Like common land, the square is a general place for use by the community, not owned by anyone in particular. In the Middle Ages, the herd of the whole village flocked and grazed on the common fields, as they were used by all without distinction or exclusion (Coop & Brunckhorst, 1999). In an urban setting, the square can have a similar function to the rural common. Since the square is of everybody, it is a free space where the community holds sway, rather than an individual owner, or a single family. It is for the public, not the private. The square brings people together and hence speaks of a communal economy, an economy of sharing instead of exclusive property. Here, value is created through cooperation and collective use, rather than through the competing trade of commodities. Even on the marketplace, where each stall is individually owned and operated, the sellers share the marketplace itself. The marketplace itself is the embodiment of the commons.

The square offers space to a kind of entrepreneurship that is not based on the entitlements derived from private craftsmanship, but on the shared efforts of a community. In the square, one organises collectively, making use of shared resources and adhering to public regulations. The results of the enterprises undertaken on

the square thus benefit the community as a whole. The space itself, where these enterprises take place, cannot be claimed by particular individuals or groups. The market may dominate on certain days, but it never makes a continuous and permanent claim on the space; the square as a common is never defined by one activity or by a single selection of people with a particular identity.

As an open space of the commons, the square is not uniform, but serves multiple, constantly changing purposes; it is everyone's because it can be anyone's, wherein lies its essential pluralism. The square itself is public and therefore it has no particular identity in the sense of a substantive significance. As an unsanctioned right, everyone can take the square, precisely because it belongs to nobody. Since the square is an inherently non-prescriptive place, it simultaneously opens up and binds together. It is nobody's home, but it can be a place where everybody feels at home. The square is communal, but this does not mean it defines the common: it is not a common denominator of sharing and feeling part of a group or club. In this sense, the square can be seen as the place where community emerges, as envisioned by Jean-Luc Nancy. This community does not consist of the aggregated sum of autonomous individuals or subjects, but is rather the expression of an inherently shared being, which is always already singular-plural, irreducible to separately existing entities. It emerges spontaneously in encounters, without a premeditated organisational model or identity, and the square is the place for this *par excellence*. The square is a place where common meaning is created, which constantly transforms with the then present (emergent, expressed) community.

For Nancy, the concept of community does not indicate a homogeneous entity. Our sense of community rather originates

in a shared coexistence in the world, something that happens unexpectedly. Nancy (2000: 29) emphasises that everything that exists always exists together with something else. In existence, therefore, we always share the world. We are always already together with others. Even when we define ourselves as unique and autonomous subjects, we have to do this by distinguishing ourselves from others. Being, therefore, always takes place in diversity, instead of unity. The 'with' is at the core of being itself. Being-with others is not a relation that is added onto a pre-existing, autonomous state of being by itself, as the origin of being often tends to be misunderstood, according to Nancy (2000: 30–31). Rather, since being always means coexistence, we always already think and interact within a certain form of community.

This notion of community should not be essentialised or reified as a natural or original entity that forms a certain foundation for social interactions and the political formation of a society, as one can find in romantic interpretations of Rousseauian ideas about a 'natural community':

Such a thinking constitutes closure because it assigns to community a common being, whereas community is a matter of something quite different, namely, of existence inasmuch as it is in common, but without letting itself be absorbed into a common substance. Being in common has nothing to do with communion, with fusion into a body, into a unique and ultimate identity that would no longer be exposed. Being in common means, to the contrary, no longer having, in any form, in any empirical or ideal place, such a substantial identity, and sharing this (narcissistic) 'lack of identity'. (Nancy, 1991: xxxviii)

The feeling of 'loss of communitarian intimacy' plays an important role in our historical understanding of the relation between community and society, according to Nancy (1991: 9); where society is a construct formed in order to deal with political interests, as 'a simple association and division of forces and needs', community is often seen as some kind of pure body in which people are bound together by sincere intimacy and harmonious relations. In contrast to this romantic notion, Nancy understands community as essentially ungrounded in its lack of identity. We do not produce community as if it were a piece of work, an opus, but we rather experience it in its 'inoperativeness', or its 'unworking' impact – community simply 'happens to us in the wake of society', neither as a pure form of shared intimacy, nor as a deliberately constructed agreement (Nancy, 1991: 11, 31). Nevertheless, one should add, this sense of community, which can spontaneously emerge on the square, can move people to act out politically and strive for the transformation of society.

For Nancy (1991: xxxvii), a sense of community and a sense of the political are inextricably bound to each other: 'the political is the place where community as such is brought into play'. However, just as Nancy associates an inherent lack of identity with community, political agency is also not based on a pre-established, strong subjectivity or ideology in his interpretation. The political is not based on a shared organisation, programme or identity that brings individuals together in a collective body, but on the understanding that we necessarily coexist with others, with whom we share no necessary similarities beyond a certain basic humanity and spatio-temporal concurrence. Political agency is not an act of the formation of a people around a specific programmatic claim, but rather the initial affirmation of

the equality of all in irreducible difference. For Nancy, political agency begins with the awareness that we share the world on an ontologically equal basis. This initial state of being is the only state of being in which we are together on a completely equal basis. An experience of the commons can highlight this ontological equality.

Nancy is interested in the conception of the 'commons' as a drive for political agency, and traces the origin of this notion back to the cloisters in the fourteenth century.³ The monastery used to be, in the first place, the communal possession of the community of monks, before individual monks could claim part of this possession on the basis of their membership of the monastic order to which the cloister pertained. Before monks had rights of possession, that is, they only had rights to usage. Since that period, the notion of the commons, argues Nancy, has been used to speak of the collective possessions of a community *apart* from its individual members. The idea of the commons, therefore, implies a shared coexistence that precedes individual claims to ownership, identity or governance. This understanding of commons becomes relevant for political agency, when it enables us to say 'we' without implicitly indicating a shared political programme, a shared national character, or a shared citizenship status. Nancy speaks of an experience of the commons that can literally open a space between and for people, without becoming a fixed ideology or designed blueprint for society. This space that is opened can enable us to ask questions like 'How can we think about society, government, law, not with the aim of achieving the *cum*, the common, but only in the hope of letting it come and taking its own chance, its own possibility of making sense?' (Nancy, 2010: 150).

We can encounter others, who live fundamentally different lives, at a specific place where we share a certain situation which suddenly makes us aware of the fact that we experience a common condition in one and the same world. Such an encounter can inspire collective political agency, and usually takes place in the social arena of public space. The public nature of the square, in contrast to places of private ownership, has such political implications. Traditionally, the square is therefore the designated place for the self-governance of the people. In the European tradition, we can certainly trace this back to the *agora* as the birthplace of democracy in ancient Greece, the square where the *demos* gathered to discuss the matters of the *polis*. As the site for the determination of the general interest, the *agora* spatially designated a form of direct democracy performed by all men with citizenship rights.

Today, the square still functions as the place where people go to claim direct influence on matters of governance. It is no longer a place where those with exclusive citizenship rights alone can raise their voice, but also for those who are not treated as equal citizens and hence wish to claim their rights. People who wish to militate for equality and justice in a broader sense beyond the liberal, enabling rights of citizenship, also convene here. Contestation against state authorities that are seen as not properly representing the people often takes place on the square.

David Harvey (2012: xvii) emphasises the intimate relation between the contemporary urban and citizenship, which holds a dynamic and revolutionary potential, particularly in the context of a class analysis. Harvey argues that capital, as the central authority, imposes itself nowadays as a process of homogenisation in cities through the high added value of property. Because

of this process, the more central areas in the city become ever more expensive and thus inaccessible to people with lower incomes, as well as to non- or anti-capitalist alternative practices. However, the capital value of the central squares of cities is not realised, because they remain essentially undeveloped. They are therefore paradoxically positioned as centres of opposition to the hegemony of capital at the very heart of capital, the city centre. In a structural reading, squares could be seen as heterotopic spaces in the Lefebvrian sense, where a radically different political organisation can be imagined and enacted, both as demand and as an alternative. They are the social spaces where disparate groups can – and do – come together in a spontaneous moment of irruption to engage in collective action.

Colonisation of the square

The spontaneous community formation on squares is difficult to manage. Historically, institutional and governing powers have always considered squares to be dangerous meeting places of the people, the crowd, the mob, the rabble. The physical assembling of large numbers of people in public space has proven to be an effective method to pressure state powers by those who cannot make use of institutional infrastructures: ‘One means by which insurgent groups overcome their general inferiority in resources is to take advantage of one resource they have – the force of numbers’ (Sewell, 2001: 58). Squares therefore have a long history of colonisation, of attempts to prevent the possible empowerment of the masses.

From the edges of the square, governing powers can cast a hidden gaze over the crowds on the open plane and hence exercise a form of control. Some powers have tried to gain control

over the commons by building large structures overlooking the square. These are vantage points, as Dale and Burrell (2008: 43ff.) have pointed out. According to them, the domination of the skyline is equated to the domination of the market and economic competition, once literally, now metaphorically. Architecture is used by political leaders to seduce, to impress and to intimidate. Dale and Burrell (2008: 170) develop this analysis with the example of the Vasari corridor in Florence. Typifying an architecture that separates and divides, it 'provides a superior route between office, church, garden and home for the powerful, whilst separating them physically and symbolically from the general populace below'.

In an urban environment significantly determined by its development within the framework of Christianity, the Church often arrived first at the square. While a church or cathedral dominates many squares, it is important to note that the square existed before the church. Originally, churches had no open space in front of them. Houses were built leaning against the church, using the church walls as props, as we still can see in the case of several medieval churches (e.g. the Santa Maria del Mar in Barcelona). Later, churches were built next to squares, where large crowds of people could gather for religious ceremonies. The common space became a semi-sacral arena, where the community stood in the shadow of the church. The square then became the outside portal of the cathedral, where one could admire its splendour from a distance. After the church, the king – and later the state – built palaces and halls opposite the church, thus making the square a front yard for the home of the governing authorities (e.g. the Piazza della Signoria in Florence). Then, also, the square was transformed into a place to hold

military exercises, hence the common Spanish name '*plaza de armas*', which can be found in several Latin American capitals (e.g. Santiago de Chile, Lima and Havana). The crowds could thus be controlled by the military, as directed from the palace.

Given the history of squares and the attraction of this central gathering site for markets, it is unsurprising that capital – the market supreme – moved in and another, increasingly hegemonic, colonisation of the square became exercised by commerce. Originally, during the European Renaissance, warehouses and palaces of rich merchants were built around the square in order to keep an eye on the market. Nowadays, we see that banks and corporations take over squares and preside very distinctively over the communal space, privatising it and transforming the social into a space of consumption and for consumers, where one has to comply with the regulation of the owner (Potsdamer Platz has been dominated by banks since it was remodelled in the 1990s). Cafés and terraces claim a monopoly on the way one is supposed to spend time on the square (Kohn, 2004). The same generic Starbucks cafés emerge everywhere; in many squares, one is effectively no longer allowed even to eat one's own food, let alone exercise one's own activities.

The commodification of the city (above) has been furthered by the privatisation of public space, where nowadays commercial activities are favoured over other social forms of gathering. Investors as well as local authorities generate profit and income from the privatisation of the public through the taxation of its space and the arrival of private enterprises. In order to minimise the risk of unmanaged gatherings on the square, access is ever more regulated and social control tightened through regulatory measures, 'security' enforcement and privately owned urban

development projects (Minton, 2006). The square as a site of contestation is rebutted by the hegemonic order through financial means, as well as other forms of disciplinary power.

In sum, the square is overlooked and controlled by the church, the government, the bank and (partially) filled in with terraces (e.g. the Zocalo in Mexico City, with the cathedral, the presidential palace and the central bank all around the same square). However, this colonisation is never complete. The square still attracts spontaneously emerging communities, which often directly oppose the powers colonising the square. Squares are not politically innocent. Since they are the place where social value arises and the public interest is defined, they are also the place of protest against dominant powers and discontent with existing injustices and inequalities (Örs, 2014: 492). The square remains the place to meet and discuss for those who are not allowed inside the palace and are thereby confined to speak from outside (as the name of the Piazza del Popolo in Rome suggests). In the contemporary context, as we know, uprisings certainly still take place in the square.

Contestation on the square

Because it is the material and symbolic place of the governing power of the people, the revolution often starts in the square, in both Western and non-Western cultures. In fact, the square tends to become synonymous with the revolution, and, in successful cases, the square is even named after it, as in the French and Cuban examples (above). It is remarkable how they still attract protestors and uprisings, even when squares have been transformed into large and anonymous expanses, as in the case of Tiananmen Square in Beijing, or when the open space

is choked with traffic, as in the case of Tahrir Square in Cairo. Known for their recent cycles of protest and repression, both squares are, incidentally, the places where a previous revolution began – Mao opened the doors of the Forbidden City (and after the revolution built the headquarters of the Central Committee) on the square, and Egyptian independence from the British empire was proclaimed at Ismailiyya Square, renamed Midan al-Tahrir (Liberation Square) – indicative of a sociocultural tradition wherein the revolutionary meaning of the very name of the place becomes deeply etched into a national psyche.

In the Tiananmen and Tahrir cases, the spatial features of the square have facilitated this symbolic political function. Both places were first ‘desacralised’ before they were ‘resacralised’ in the name of the people (Sewell, 2001: 66). Tiananmen Square, for example, was a place of vertical communication between the Communist Party leadership and the anonymous masses, before it was reclaimed as a space of horizontal self-governance during the student uprising. The Tiananmen and Tahrir cases also both exemplify the loss of the people’s square in its plurality, as attempts to reclaim the square were eventually violently oppressed by the authorities. In the case of Tiananmen Square, the authorities’ fear of the symbolic power of the square is a reason why it is no longer used for official, ceremonial gatherings, and now functions mostly to attract foreign visitors, while anniversary gatherings for the revolution at Tahrir Square are forcibly prevented.

Nevertheless, as stated, the square remains ‘a locality’, an open space where horizontality reigns, despite attempts of a vertical gaze of power to colonise it. The square continues to be the main place where sparks of a sense of the commons and of political change are ignited. The occupation of squares in the context

of, for example, the Indignados movement, Occupy and the Arab Spring have aimed to create space and visibility for the commitment to the commons of ordinary people, contrary to the occupation of squares by the state and hegemonic centres of power: the Church, the Crown, the army, the stock exchange. Taking place in the all-embracing, globalising phase of neoliberalism, these occupations have aimed at both top-down imposed state ideologies and capital in its urban form, protesting at the denial of heterogeneous and communal space.

In addition to the iconic squares that became symbols for a movement, occasionally other communal, public spaces in the city have also been reclaimed during recent protests, such as in city centre parks. Occupy Wall Street in New York used Zuccotti Park as a home base, which physically appears very much like a square with trees, while the Taksim Square protests in Istanbul originated and ended at the adjacent Gezi Park, a formalised, fairly open, rectangular space that operates somewhat as an extension of the square.

The occupation of Zuccotti Park during Occupy Wall Street did not only take place in reaction to the economic crisis, but also in response to the extensive segregation and policing of public space in New York City (Smithsimon, 2012). Due to gentrification, public plazas were increasingly designated for the richer segments of the population; stop-and-frisk tactics by the police filtered out undesired bodies from the public space. While the Occupy Movement reopened public space to a wider variety of people, the protests in Istanbul established a week-long common. Also in this case, the occupiers attempted to collectively reclaim a square with strong symbolic power associated with state ideology.

The Gezi Park/Taksim Square site was originally constructed on a vast plain where army barracks were located during the Ottoman empire (Örs, 2014: 492–7). As in the Tiananmen and Tahrir cases, it had been the site of an early revolutionary moment, when the barracks housed a counter-movement against the overthrow of the sultan during the establishment of the Turkish Republic. The recent protest arose when the ruling Justice and Development Party (*Adelet ve Kalinma Partisi*, AKP) attempted to impose a certain neo-Ottoman identity on the area as part of a large-scale redevelopment project. The protesters envisioned a more inclusive urban landscape and republican imagination that, following violent dispersal by the police, evolved into a process of night-time assemblies in parks around and outside the city. Here, as in the Occupy case, we see how the square can form a starting point for solidarity and for political alternatives.

A comparable reappropriation of public space for a wider community formation took place during the occupation of Syntagma Square in Greece. As Stavrides (2012: 558) notes,

Communities create ‘common space’, space used under conditions decided on by communities and open to everyone. ... The community is formed, developed, and reproduced through practices focused on common space. To generalise this principle: the community is developed through communing, through acts and forms of organisation oriented toward the production of the common.

A distinctive quality of the recent protests in squares, underlining the communality of the space and a reappropriation of

the public arena, is the absence of specific leadership. A striking feature of recent protest movements that have gathered on squares has been their refusal to be identified with and certainly not represented by a single political organisation defining their programme or mode of communication. On the contrary, these movements have generally been characterised by their leaderless organisational structure and emerged outside of the existing networks of civil society organisations such as NGOs and trade unions, as well as political parties (Ishkanian, Glasius & Ali, 2013). While the space of the square is occupied, the event of the protest is not claimed by a specific institution, party or organisation. No one can exclusively appropriate the expressed critique of existing political and economic governance, which is seen as already for too long framed in exclusive and exclusionary terms.

The recent occupations and expressions of contestation on the square were performed by a multitude that based a 'we' not on a shared ethnicity, nationality, citizenship status or ideology, but on a sharing of the same world at an ontological level, as envisioned by Nancy. This multitude cannot be theorised as a (single) social movement and thus runs counter to a large segment of new social movement theory, where an emphasis is placed on identity claims, made especially in order to plead for equal rights for minority or 'deviant' groups. The struggle of new social movements no longer takes place only in the area of the class struggle, but also addresses social exchange and cultural production (Melucci, 1996). The civil rights, feminist and environmentalist movements, to name some prominent examples, have all employed a shared culture and collective identities in order to push for political change (Castells, 2009). This emphasis on a shared culture and identity, which provides a shared

meaning and position to the movement, tends to be absent in the coming together of multitudes on a square.

The non-identitary nature of the multitude was clearly expressed in the case of the Occupy Movement. There, the widely used slogan ‘We are the 99%’ indicated that the only antagonistic division between friend and enemy was drawn between an elite 1%, unjustly possessing most political and economic power, and everybody else, a highly diverse multitude with wide-ranging backgrounds and sociocultural identities, but importantly unified in some sense of suffering from the economic crisis and lack of political influence:

‘We are the 99%’ highlights a division and a gap, the gap between the wealth of the top 1% and the rest of us. As it mobilizes the gap between the 1% with half the country’s wealth and the other 99% of the population, the slogan asserts a collectivity. It does not unify this collectivity under a substantial identity – race, ethnicity, religion, nationality. Rather it asserts it as the ‘we’ of a divided people, the people divided between expropriators and expropriated. (Dean, 2011: 1)

The multitude does collectively contest injustices and unequal treatment, but not on the basis of a shared culture or identity (Stavrvides, 2012: 592–3). Rather, it comes together on the basis of a shared yet heterogeneous perspective on agency. Other than the undifferentiated unity of the masses, the multitude is composed of a set of singularities, whose difference cannot be reduced to sameness (Hardt & Negri, 2004: 99). Community formation, as both Nancy and Hardt and Negri understand it, occurs in a being-together in the world with others who might

be radically different from us. The inherent confrontation with difference does not always lead to recognition and consensus, but entails also insecurity and an ongoing discussion of society's features and foundations (Kaika & Karaliotas, 2014). Such a continuous questioning of fixed foundations can be found in the political agency that was recently developed, and continues to be developed on squares all over the world criticising dominant power structures that maintain deep inequalities between economic and social elites, ordinary people and especially marginalised groups.

Recent movements and uprisings – in locations as diverse as Kiev, Bangkok and Hong Kong – have not only opposed central political authority, but specifically critiqued the dominant status quo of neoliberal governance and capitalist economy. Capitalism is critiqued because it is not based on commonality but on the individual, and on ownership in the material sense instead of ownership as a sense of self or singularity that is always co-shaped by others. During the 2014 Rio protests, a whole financial and shopping thoroughfare, Paulista Avenue, was effectively converted into a square as a space of the common. In contrast to the existing power structures, squares offer a place to experiment with political agency, which is based on a notion of the commons. The multitude can act politically, not because it stands as one or has a single identity, but because in its internal diversity it also has a longing for a more just and egalitarian governance, in common.

Harvey (2012: 161–2) speaks in this sense of the creation of a 'political commons' in a central public space, as 'a place for open discussion and debate over what that power is doing and how best to oppose its reach'. In reference to various recent protest

movements that occupied public squares, Harvey notes that the collective power of human bodies in public space is still the most effective instrument of opposition when all other means of access are blocked. Dhaliwal (2012) emphasises the same physical occupation of the square with an encampment as an important strategy of resistance in the Indignados movement, a strategy inspired by the occupation at Tahrir. The physical place of Tahrir Square had been crucial in enabling previously dispersed groups of protesters against the Mubarak regime to gain greater visibility and a central, easily accessible place to coordinate their actions.

Patel (2013) hypothesises that the strategies of resistance as applied at Tahrir particularly inspired protests in cities where there was a large, focal square that could be occupied, as was the case in Madrid and Barcelona, where the Indignados movement attracted large crowds of people. New spatial relations were created on these squares through mass public deliberation and horizontal decision-making in general assemblies, as opposed to the dominant, hierarchical structure of the existing political order. However, this enactment of a different form of political decision-making on the square was of a temporary nature. Eventually the camps on the squares in Spain were evicted due to a combination of police repression and the need for people to focus on their lives outside of the square. As in Istanbul the following year, an attempt was made to continue mobilisation through neighbourhood assemblies. Although the question of what sustainable effect may be expected from the efforts of movements such as Indignados remains, this might not be the most important question to ask in relation to protests that evoke the creation of a political commons. Their greater significance

may lie just in their enunciation of the possibility of different social relations and forms of decision-making, which can inspire new political practices in other settings, beyond the temporary occupation of the square.

Real and direct democracy

One of the most remarkable aspects of the Occupy Wall Street movement (OWS) is its capacity to ground itself in a struggle for a public commons. For many involved, including myself, Zuccotti Park was our public commons, our agora, just as the gardens in Union Square have been for so many years in New York. 'The agora was the center of athletic, artistic, spiritual, and political life of the city,' notes OWS activist Morgan Jenness. Yet, today, many suffer from 'agoraphobia ... a fear of participating as a full citizen in the commons,' she continues. OWS challenged this logic, grounding itself in the public commons from the movement's very first day. (Shepard, 2012: 21)

The movements that demand 'real democracy' and oppose themselves to human indignation offer a space in the square for people to organise a variety of activities, in which anyone can take part at any time, thus creating a constantly evolving form of organising in which the one person can take the place of the other according to the flow of events. People continue to find inspiration in places where one can transform from a random passer-by to a participant of a general assembly, while simultaneously children are playing in an area of political protest, people doing gardening, reading books, practising yoga and discussing the latest sports results on the streets, and the energy

of tense confrontation and liberation ebb and flow like the tides, everything constantly moving and transforming. Many of the protests in squares take place at election time, showing other expressions of political engagement, which form an alternative to voting. An example is the case of Spain, where the first large gatherings on Puerta del Sol took place close to the date of local and regional elections.

The communities that gather on the square typically develop decentralised and open-ended network structures, with participatory and consensus-based practices of decision-making and horizontal modes of organising. In so doing, they open up the possibility for a much more diverse and inclusive practice of democracy in which conflicting identities and opinions flourish, quite differently from the existing systems of representative liberal democracy (Maeckelbergh, 2014: 347). The political agency on the square takes place here and now, as an expression of direct, participatory democracy. Swyngedouw (2014: 123) emphasises that this agency does not articulate specific social or economic demands directed at the elites, but aims at a revisiting of the nature of ‘the political’. It can take a peaceful or militant form, but is in general opposed to the rules and regulations of institutionalised security systems, which routinely prohibit large, unregulated gatherings in undesignated public space. In a political moment, any public space can be reclaimed from such regulations: ‘The space of the political is to disturb the socio-spatial ordering by re-arranging it with those who stand in for “the people” or the community’ (Swyngedouw, 2014: 132).

These protests should not be directly judged on their demonstrable long-term ‘outcomes’, let alone with respect to their immediate impact on institutional structures. They rather have a

value as 'prefigurative politics', as 'a practice, movement, moment or development in which certain political ideals are experimentally actualised in the "here and now", rather than hoped to be realised in a distant future' (van de Sande, 2013: 230).⁴ Again, movements of prefigurative politics do not see it as their highest goal to assume some type of durable state power, but rather exhibit an alternative, horizontal community formation (Dhalwail, 2012: 268); the common space that is opened up in these movements indicates a threshold to new possibilities because it is not 'demarcated by defining parameters' (Stavrides, 2012: 589).

Uruguayan journalist and writer Eduardo Galeano nicely captured this kind of movement in words, while standing on the Plaza de Catalunya in Barcelona during the Indignados occupation.⁵ For him, it is the enthusiasm generated in the occupation of the square that is its most important effect. Referring to the Greek origin of the word 'enthusiasm' – *entheos*, to have the Gods inside – Galeano points out that enthusiasm is experience of the intrinsic value of life, which we should not allow to be devalued by political or economic mismanagement. According to Galeano, we are currently living in an uninspired world, but the young people he saw around him during the occupation of the Plaza de Catalunya showed him that we could look beyond the threshold of this world, towards new perspectives.

This opening of a window to another possible world is more important to Galeano than any question about concrete institutional changes to which the protests and occupation of squares might lead. What interests him is what is happening at this moment, a moment in which an endless range of possibilities is announced. He makes a comparison to the experience of love in which eternity is also folded into the moment. When we truly

experience love, we feel that we are really alive, and we no longer think about dying. Love is endless in the moment we experience it, as long as it lasts. This experience, Galeano continues, indicates a calculation of time other than the checks and balances that are made in the context of economic efficiency, a political system that is defined by the calculation of profit and loss. The square can thus be a place that nurtures alternative relations to the materialism underwriting the present neoliberal capitalist hegemony.

Galeano's interpretation of the events of protest on the square echoes Nancy's understanding of how unexpected events can contribute to the opening up of another world. Our co-appearance in the world is characterised by Nancy and Bailly (1991: 8) as an event, an event that cannot be grasped in a mode of thought or speech: 'The event surprises or else it is not an event', as Nancy (2001: 167) elsewhere states. The event-ness of the event can therefore never be captured in our thoughts or expectations. The meaning of the world emerges together with us in this event, and is therefore not external to this world (Nancy, 2007: 43). The event is not 'what is produced or could be shown' as the outcome, or even the entry, of guided human interactions, but rather the very happening of the unexpected – which also implies that there is not only one ideal world, but a 'multiplicity of worlds' (Nancy, 2007: 109, 169). No first origin can be designated as the point out of which the world emerged. There is nothing other than the 'happening' of the world itself that takes place in each instant, in each situation. As such, the world itself is also no 'effect of some particular operation of production', but it 'springs from all sides' (Nancy, 2001: 83).

The fact that there are more worlds possible opens the possibility of disagreement with and rejection of the one in which we

find ourselves and can lead us to engage in a struggle to improve it. It is precisely the recognition that no blueprint for the world can be made that can form the basis for a struggle against injustices created by an ordering of the world which assumes to assign people to unequal, but seemingly natural positions. A single, 'true' arrangement of the world would be a foundational illusion with the unjust pretention to generate order:

To create the world means: immediately, without delay, reopening each possible struggle for a world, that is, for what must form the contrary of a global injustice against the background of general equivalence. But this means to conduct this struggle precisely in the name of the fact that this world is coming out of nothing, that there is nothing before it and that it is without models, without principle and without given end, and that it is precisely what forms the justice and the meaning of a world. (Nancy, 2007: 54–5)

Conclusion

Flemish writer Paul van Ostaijen's ([1916] 1982) short story 'The City of Constructors' (*De stad der opbouwers*) narrates what happens in the city of Creixcrol, where the mayor has decided that demolishing buildings is too easy and morally wrong. It is therefore forbidden to tear anything down, and citizens are encouraged to build as much as possible. A building fever takes hold of the city. Everybody starts constructing new buildings. Soon there is no more space available for new buildings, and the people cannot continue to build into the heights. Consequently, the squares are all abolished and filled with buildings. This is not to everybody's liking, and an anti-building movement arises. The

leader of the movement is promptly arrested and sentenced to the pillory as an example to anyone wishing to tear a construction down. His sentencing also presents an excellent opportunity for a festival. However, the executioner notifies the judge that this is impossible, since there are no longer any squares and hence no place for the pillory and festivities. As soon as the people hear of this, they rebel, since they are longing for festivities. The city council is expelled and the leader of the anti-building movement is freed and named the new mayor. In his first speech standing on the balcony of the city hall he asks: 'What do the people want?' 'Squares!' they respond in unison.

Squares are the quintessential public space. They are the place where a sense of the common is created and reinforced, through a singular-plural sense of community, grounded in an open and accessible, empty and horizontal spatiality. Everybody can be equal on the square. Pluriform and spontaneous communities emerge in this place, inciting a solidarity based on new possibilities for a shared political agency, instead of a shared identity or culture. As the place of the common, squares are the privileged places at which and from where to oppose the powers that be and to imagine new worlds. Politics is not only a matter of ideas and discussions, but also of space and locality. The square is an actor in the making, bringing large numbers of people together, constituting social meaning and enabling the literal 'taking place' of protest. On the square is embedded a resistance to control as well as a sense of togetherness that can take many forms. It materialises a being in common that is not planned or designed other than through its being as a *place* in the full meaning of the word. The square thus becomes the stage of society, where the common is enacted.

Notes

1 Our analysis in this chapter is mainly based on the development of an urban environment influenced by European and Christian traditions. This is not a development, however, that is exclusive to these, and our designation of the square as a locality of the commons is also illustrated by examples from around the world.

2 The Persian-Arabic equivalent of 'square' – Latinised as 'meydân', or similar – with similar forms in, for example, Sanskrit, and etymologically traced as the proto-Indo-European 'méð^hyoś' – cf. Latin 'medius' – has a meaning of 'middle', thus specifically referencing the central siting of the square in the urban settlement.

3 Cloisters are literally the enclosed open spaces of monasteries (attached to a church), which obviously links closely to the present subject (the words 'cloister' and 'enclosure' have the same Latin root, 'clausus', past participle of 'claudere').

4 See van de Sande, this volume (Eds.).

5 See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IcCo_DbBiHo

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