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MATRIX EXAMINATRIX  
DISPERSION AND CONCENTRATION

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‘Die Masse ist eine matrix [...] Das Publikum ist ein Examinator, doch ein zerstreuter.’

– Walter Benjamin, ‘Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner Reproduzierbarkeit’, XV

‘The mass is a matrix’ That’s how Benjamin starts the last chapter of his artwork essay. Before becoming the title of a blockbuster movie, a ‘matrix’ was an electric apparatus for automatically steering the flows of cinema. But of course, *matrix* also means the place where something is born, the mutant organ that gives birth. According to Benjamin, the quantity which is inherent in masses (not only as art or cinema audiences) has the potential for the transmutation into quality. With the introduction of mechanical reproduction, in Benjamin’s words, ‘the greatly increased mass of participants has produced a change in the mode of participation’.

In the framework of Benjamin’s attempt to generally carve out ‘some fundamental aspects of a new materialist art theory’ (SW I, 984), the central concept for this changed mode of participation is *Zerstreuung*. Yet, ‘Zerstreuung’ is an ambiguous term. It refers to the absence, the dispersion, the distractedness of minds, in contrast to ‘Sammlung’, ‘Versenkung’, ‘Konzentration’. On this level, Benjamin does not at all follow

Adorno’s attack on ‘de-concentration’ in the cultural industry, who in his critique of the artwork essay wrote to Benjamin: ‘The laughter of the cinema audience is [...] full of the worst bourgeois sadism; the expertise of newspaper boys discussing sports appears highly dubious to me; I do not find the theory of “Zerstreuung” convincing, despite its seductiveness.’ (SW I, 1003f.). On the contrary, Benjamin puts hope in a new and emancipatory mode of reception in dispersion: ‘A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it [...]. In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the work of art.’

We need to break through the opposite relations of concentration versus dispersion, of high culture versus culture for the masses, of attention versus enjoyment, and understand dispersion as something other than the negation of concentration, as something other than the destruction and dissolution of concentration as assembly – so that Benjamin’s emancipatory dimensions of dispersion can unfold and concatenate with the (process of) assembling. Going beyond the customarily dichotomous relation, dispersion and concentration condense into an assemblage of two foldings: there is an intensification, a densification in dispersion, which does not necessarily consist in concentration or contemplation. And there is a dispersion, a multiplication in assembling, which does not consist in unification.

‘The public is an examiner’, *aber ein zerstreuter*, an absent-minded one, a distracted and dispersed one, this is how Benjamin ends one of the versions of his last chapter of the artwork essay. The public inspects and researches, it is no longer in the passive position of spectators or on-lookers of an artistic or political representation. In dispersion, the public becomes *publicum*, it constitutes a new publicness of distracted participants and is part of the event. At the same time, with their participation the many change not only their part, but the mode of participation, the distribution and the composition of the public. With participation as recomposition of the many a kind of attention arises that does not correspond to the bourgeois concentration in front of a work of art or a political speaker. The participatory attention of the many is a presentist one, it is real and medial at the same time.

Benjamin associates the artistic transformation with radical politics, the dissolution of the artistic aura with the revolutionary possibilities which arise with the new art that has become mechanically reproducible. It is able to ‘mobilize masses’, inasmuch as these masses take on a new quality, becoming distracted masses, *non-conforming* masses in twofold perspective: Outwardly, this mass disagrees, is disobedient in terms of how it is governed. Yet it is most notably the composition of the mass itself that sets it apart from, for instance, the Canettian criteria of a stagnating, dense or agitated mass. Non-conformity here means the refusal of identitarian and striating structures, the dismissal of conformity in the sense of a harmonization of its parts. Above all, a dispersed mass is non-conforming in that it conceptualizes composition as a concatenation of singularities.

## The Impossibility of Assembling the Dispersed Masses

It is an ancient fear of the elites that the masses are set in motion, that actions come into being along with desires and ways of life that can no longer be controlled, no longer subdued, no longer governed. And it is an ancient discursive pattern to ridicule the moving of masses as populist seduction, to stress their ignorant laughter and to infantilize them by only observing the (‘newspaper’)boys, in order to ultimately discredit them as negligible and apolitical. However, the threat of mobilized masses persists, the fear of an insurrection that challenges and breaches the established order.

How the masses are mobilized for governmental participation, and precisely not for insurrection, that is the pivotal question of democracy. Since the 18th century, discourses about the rule of the *demos* have been permeated by a recurrent topos: one of the relation between crowd and assembly. In western political philosophy, the practice known from Greek as well as Roman antiquity is regarded as the ideal practice of self-government: all free citizens of a city or an empire – the so-called *demos* or *populus* – gather in the market square, debate and decide on common concerns. But when an actualization of this civil form of government was debated in 18th century, doubts about the practicability of a ‘direct’ or ‘ab-

solute’ democracy concerning larger state structures predominated. Because of its numerical quantity, the populace was deemed not to be able to assemble anymore, and thus no longer to have the ability to immediately govern itself. The citizen was in danger of disappearing in the crowd, not only in a mass of his peers, but in the much larger quantity of those who did not even count when it came to the assembly: the women, the poor and foreigners.

There were fierce arguments about whether the *demos* of *patres familias* was able to or had to convene firsthand in the 18th century for political decisions in a large state like France or a far larger one like the USA. The advocates of one side of the debate – among them Locke, Montesquieu, and not least of all Madison – argued that the citizens had to have themselves be represented by parliament and delegates. In order to oppose the danger of a tyranny of the masses yet still stand up for a plurality of interests, representative democracy was considered by James Madison to be the only form of popular rule possible, *de facto* the government of the minority over the majority, of the property owners over the less wealthy and the poor. The federalist founding fathers of the USA saw the stability of the polity threatened by a radically democratic participation of the masses; democratic passions were not supposed to define political day-to-day business immediately and unguidedly.<sup>1</sup>

Here the masses are considered as too dispersed for modern democracy on two accounts: They are dispersed because too many of them are distributed over a territory to make an assembly seem possible. Because of this dispersion they are denied direct participation in the distribution of space. On the other hand, the masses are assessed as being too emotional. It is alleged that they can only exert democratic practices as a sentiment, as a passion, as an emotional distraction; they lack contemplation and containment. For the advocates of representative democracy the comprehensive participation of the people harbors the danger of affect and insurrection. Their dispersion has to be subdued by representation.

In absolutist times, Hobbes had already worded the fear that a dispersed, ungovernable multitude that cannot be unified by the representation of the Leviathan under his indivisible sovereignty through obedience gives

rise to turmoil in the body politic, makes it sick and can even destroy it. ‘Concord, health; sedition, sickness; and civil war, death’ (Hobbes 1966[1651]: 5). However, it is not just the non-unified dispersed who present a threat to sovereignty in the eyes of the first modern state theorist, but also their uncontrolled assemblies, which are always suspected of conspiring against the representation. Hobbes cautions against the irregular political motions of the multitude: ‘Irregular systems, in their nature but leagues, or sometimes mere concourse of people without union to any particular design, not by obligation of one to another, but proceeding only from a similitude of wills and inclinations’ (Hobbes 1966: 181) Non-representationist assemblies of the many jeopardize sovereignty.

Even so, in 18th century an equally notable protagonist of modern state theory vehemently argued against the necessity of political representation in regards to the taming of the *demos*, and explicitly against the reasoning of unconvenable, dispersed citizen masses. In his *Contrat Social*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau felt compelled to phrase an unequivocal contradiction. Rousseau’s key argument is that size does not play a part in the feasibility of an assembly. Refuting his contemporary critics, Rousseau refers to the Roman republic where, in spite of its size in numbers, assembling the ‘people of Rome’ succeeded frequently and periodically (Rousseau 1762: III 12). To him, the physical presence of the entire citizenry constitutes the foundation of legislative power. Rousseau writes, ‘The Sovereign cannot act save when the people is assembled’ (Rousseau 1762: III 12). Also: ‘Sovereignty [...] cannot be represented’ (Rousseau 1762: III 15), because the sole sovereign is the mutual will of the ‘people’ (*la volonté générale*). No elected government, no delegates and no public servants can act in place of the assembled. But as soon as the *multitude* gathers, it has to become a unified political body, a *volonté générale* of legislative power. ‘As soon as this multitude is so united in one body, it is impossible to offend against one of the members without attacking the body, and still more to offend against the body without the members resenting it’ (Rousseau 1762: I 7). No longer dispersed, the *multitude* is unified in the popular assembly as a sovereignty, and is, in self-empowerment, forced to obedience (Rousseau 1762: III 13). As is known, the Rousseauian criticism of representation did not achieve a hegemonial position, on the contrary: the triumph of democracy in ‘the West’ was based substantially on its interconnection with

political representation.

In democracy theory up to the present, the factual dispersion of the masses constitutes the negative foil and basis for the legitimacy of representative democracy. Forms of protest are, as collective democratic practices of participation and self-organization beyond elections, hardly appreciated; only representative democracy is valid as a normative, normalized and positively connoted mode of democracy. Positions are still taken today that participatory aspects even burden the democracy of mass societies, actual participation is discredited as “bad” normality’ (Kreisky and Löffler 2010: 94). Therefore in Europe, the *demos* is not structurally excluded, but it is currently ruled in a neoliberal-governmental nexus of social insecurity and free market and finance economies.

## Non-representationist Practices of the Masses of the Precarious

‘They do not represent us’ (‘No nos representan’) is one of the slogans that could be heard in the Puerta del Sol in Madrid, and read on banners in May and June of this year. Those who do not represent, meant not only the elected social-democratic government, but also the oppositional conservative party. Both parties and government were denied the capability of representation. Similar attacks on elected and electable democratic representatives could also be heard and seen in Greece and Portugal. These movements of the precarious, called the ‘outraged’ from Spain to Greece after the best-seller by Stéphane Hessel, relate to the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt and concatenate again and again with the slogan ‘Real Democracy now’.<sup>2</sup>

Democracy yes, representation no – that is nothing new, it could be objected; once again it is a matter of the traditional contrast between representative democracy on the one side and grassroots or direct democracy on the other. But there is more to it: it is a matter of collective political practices, which in 2011 are testing forms of non-representationist democracy in the Europe of representative democracy to an unusually great extent. Non-representationist practices are not a wholly new invention,

they have historical genealogies, not only in anarchism, but also in the Zapatist movement of the 1990s, and the anti-globalization and Euro-MayDay movement of the 2000s. Yet the current protests of the precarious go far beyond the leftist social-critical spectrum. And what was already becoming evident in the EuroMayDay movement is that it is not by chance that the precarious of postfordism reject political representation. The precarious cannot be unified or represented, their interests are disparate, classical forms of corporatist organization prove ineffective. These scores of the precarious are dispersed across production conditions and also by various production methods, which absorb and generate subjectivities, expand their economic exploitation, multiply identities and workplaces. It is not only work that is precarious and dispersed, but also life. For this very reason, the protesting precarious can not be unified and subdued through representation. They do not make reductionist demands, but fight for fundamental changes in society.

## The Assemblies of the Dispersed

Since May the dispersed precarious have also been gathering in Europe, as non-conforming masses in the central squares of smaller and bigger cities. These squares no longer signify a location where the male citizens assembled as in the Greek Agora, and they are now far from constituting a materialization of modern – also with a male connotation – public sphere. For the main part, public space is assigned to private commercial use, staged for touristic appropriation. The squares are spaces you cross, yet in which you do not linger.

Running counter to this development, for the past several months a concentration has been occurring in dispersion, and a multiplication in assembling, in these very places. It was not the old, limited *demos* that re-occupied streets and squares, and not one ‘people’ that banded together independently from its representatives. Entirely heterogenous compositions occupied the squares, organised the protest camps and held the assemblies.

The protests were open to the dispersed masses, they did not limit themselves to a certain clientele or a collective subject with a necessarily inscribed constructed identity. ‘Our diversity is our strength!’, was one of the slogans at Syntagma Square in June of 2011, at one of the largest protests since the end of the military dictatorship; Greek flags were unwelcome. Everybody was welcome to participate in their singularities. And they gathered from everywhere, people from all parts of the population participated in the protest marches, assemblies and camps. On a European day of action in June the dispersed gathered masses numbered up to a million in Spain. Predominant parts of the population showed solidarity with the movements and acted supportively. ‘Democracy belongs to the people’ is stated in the manifesto of ¡Democracia Real Ya!, ‘which means that government is made of every one of us’.<sup>3</sup> No unification is sought, instead the diversity of voices is practiced in assembling.

These democracy movements reject the imagined community of a nation, the dividing identities that seek to striate and normalize the dispersed singularities. This becomes most evident in the ‘Manifest Transmaricabollo’ that was adopted by the queer part of the ¡Democracia Real Ya! movement at the assembly Transmaricabollo del Sol in Madrid at the beginning of June.<sup>4</sup> In general, in these movements no identity, closed and exclusive We is to be generated, but a radical openness, accompanied by the invitation to everyone to affiliate and participate in – on the basis of a respectful contact with each other.

Precarization also always involves the impossibility of clear identity positions, and in the context of the transnationalization of labor markets, coupled with increasing exploitation, the rejection of homogenizations in relation to gender, sexual preference, ‘race’, culture and nation. In the declaration of the participants of the 15M-Hub Meeting in Barcelona in mid-September of 2011, not only can a solidarization with migrants be found, but migrant living and working conditions are identified as the most distinct example for the privatization of labor rights and the devaluation of productive activities, as the one model of the degradation and denial of social, political and civil rights that will become the prevailing one for the entire working population. The transformation of democratic modes, this is made clear in the declaration, can only proceed through

associations and alliances with migrants: ‘We are all migrants. No one is illegal!’<sup>5</sup> In their criticism of representative democracy, the movement breaches the established order in which the distribution of space takes place by assigning and revoking rights as well as by means of social positionings through established identities.

When the dispersed precarious gather in great numbers as non-conforming masses, the normalized mainstream usually expects their dispersion, being a filthy deformation, to leave behind its marks, also in the very tangible form of a stinking chaos of garbage and excrements. These are the public signs feared by both bourgeois press and government, the non-occurrence of which, again, is highlighted in the media in an annoyed manner. The expectation of scattered garbage implies that these are occupations carried out by those who are not exactly capable of taking responsibility for the common, who act against the norm which in cleanliness attests conformity and governability. In that logic, rebelliousness and lack of concentration manifest themselves in disorder and filth the same way as do disintegration and the ethnically other, those who are not only in danger of dropping out of society and nation, but by tendency also out of the European Union. The expectation of a scattered spread of waste equates to a racist, classicist and depoliticizing distribution of the dominant orderly space.

Yet the protests do not comply with this hegemonial distribution of social space. They do not leave trash behind, they evade the expectation of chaos, disorder and filth. At the same time, they introduce a ‘disordered’, reordering order with their camps that thwarts the conventional use of that place. A variety of committees are established, among other things for security, medical assistance, hygiene and publicity work. Public kitchens come into existence, libraries (Barcelona) and even schools (Tel Aviv) – a new sociality on a public square in a process of self-organizing.

In Spain, the countrywide protests take shape in dispersed concentrations. During the ¡Democracia Real Ya! movement, at times over sixty Spanish city squares were occupied, and converted to an inclusive public camp sociality. On a daily basis, assemblies of the dispersed precarious take place in them, in which ‘real democracy’ is practiced and intensified. Not as a

direct democracy which involves the electorate in government decisions by way of a referendum, but as a self-organized, non-representationist, presentist democracy which transpires in the moment of the assembly. The assembly takes on the dispersed form of an assemblage made up of precarious singularities. In it the dispersed become visible and audible to each other, and the fact that they are many and that they are diverse can be perceived. They multiply and amplify each other in coming together, they become aware of each other in the moment of presentist democracy.

And the police reacts and legitimates their operations with foreseeable argumentations of order, security and hygiene. Eviction means cleansing and a demonstration of the re-established control and governability of the public – without comprehending, but perhaps sensing that the practices of presentist democracy are in the process of breaching these logics.

To the repressive expulsion of the occupiers of public spaces by the police, to the clearing-out of camps and squares, the gathered dispersed always react by returning and with persistence, to then disperse out to the borough assemblies in further practices of self-organization. The intensification in dispersion and the multiplication in assembling become the crucial components of the non-conforming mass as the presentist mode of democracy.

Initially focused on the central square of a city, the paradigmatic space of publicness, the movement soon again disperses into the boroughs and spreads the practices of presentist democracy through decentralized local debates. Barcelona has a long tradition of dispersed assemblies in the parts of the city, they initialized a general strike in autumn of 2010 and now have been reactivated for the democracy movement. However, the current borough assemblies do not revolve around a traditional strike, but rather around the practice of exodus from existing conditions in order to exercise different economies and socialities. The self-organizing people assembled do not want to address the government, their goal is not the takeover of power and not the setup of a new society in another place. The exodus of the assembled precarious ones does not lead into a beyond, but it leads beyond the limits of the public and the private set by the dominant order, out onto the central squares and into innumerable as-

semblies. Breaches open in the dispersed concentration of the diffusing and heterogeneous precarious ones, in which the setup of a different, solidaric and ‘better society’<sup>6</sup> commences.

Through the association with local social struggles, the forceful state-mandated expulsions in Spain, the eviction of people from flats they no longer can pay the mortgages for, are sought to be prevented nonviolently. Quite a few of the numerous evictions could be averted. The dispersed concertedly face the police expulsions and not only expand the space of publicness, but at the same time the one of the rightfully private. They turn dispersion into a constituent power against eviction and for the right to housing.

To defamate the protest of the democracy movements as merely being distribution battles underrates the qualitative change of the participation that the participants generate. In line with this, the ‘right to housing’ is not *demande*d in the manifesto of the ¡Democracia Real Ya! movement, but it is emphasized that active measures of support for it are taken.<sup>7</sup> The threat to this right was also the immediate cause of the protests in Israel.

The resistance against the police evictions from the flats ‘works through our ability to reinvent the social alliance. For it is not the state that can put a stop to the logic of the market, but it is the other stranger who plants himself in front of my building and halts the fateful automatism of eviction. Today for me, for you tomorrow,’ says Amador Fernández-Savater, journalist and participant in the Spanish protest movement, in an interview with the Argentinian paper *Página/12* (Gago 2011).

## When Quantity Transmutates into Quality

Benjamin associates the technical reproducibility, as a form of progress, with radical politics and revolutionary possibilities, because it ‘can mobilize masses’. Electronic and new media like social networks and Twitter also play an important role in the mobilization of the dispersed in current democracy movements. They disseminate and distribute infos and docu-

mentation on a worldwide scale, and bring together a diversity of positions or inter- and transnational events on individual websites at the same time, create transversal networks and the possibility of pandemic contagion. On occasions like these, new media are more than communication networks and forums of self-representation and counter-public. With the help of live streaming, virtually real participations over great and small distances are made possible.

Yet to label them Internet or Facebook revolutions does not grasp the tendency of the concatenation of medium and event. The protests materialize on the streets, and with that they are nothing entirely different from their materialization on the web. Part of the dispersed virtual masses who concentrate around a becoming event and enter into an exchange with each other are, simultaneously or at another point in time, physically present at the actual assemblies. Infos and live streams of the assemblies are put on the web instantaneously. The widespread exchange via electronic media has, on the one hand, unmistakably contributed to the mobilization of the masses. On the other hand, live streams have expanded the traditional understanding of physical participation. With this of course, the new media have also taken over the classic amplifying function of media, sometimes in the form of a detour because the mass media were not open as a result of censorship and other ways of preclusion. The by far more interesting aspect, however, is in the conjunction of the medial and located components of concentration and dispersion, in the inseparable concatenation of medium and event. Only with this does quantity change into quality: in the day-to-day handling of the multiplication in the assembly, in the trying-out of polyvocal assemblies of the singularities ‘on site’, constantly in exchange with the help of social media tools, but also in the equally day-to-day handling of the concentration in the dispersion, when those parts of a movement who are not ‘on site’ carry out new appropriations in the social media or in other sites.

Quality transmutates into quality when, especially with the help of new medial and social modes, the form of organization transmutates as well; when, instead of the dichotomy of concentrated and dispersed mass, a non-conforming mass develops, in which the potentialities of assembling and dispersing are no longer understood as opposites, but actualised in

their exchange. This non-conforming mass is indeed a matrix, because it operates as a multiplicity, and because it not only concatenates singularities, but also produces them. Its *publicum* is no figure of reception, of contemplation, of immersion, but one that stays dispersed in its assembly and carries out intensities and concentrations in dispersion: a *publicum* in an involved and simultaneously ‘examining posture’, as a non-conforming mass and as a *matrix examinatrix*.

Translated from German by Thomas Taborsky.

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1 See Hamilton, Madison, and Jay (2003[1887/1888]); also see Jörke (2011).

2 The protests in Israel, Chile and the U.S. in turn relate to the ‘indignants’ in Spain and Greece.

3 <http://www.democraciarealya.es/manifiesto-comun/manifiesto-english/> or: <http://spanishrevolutionforoutsiders.blogspot.com/p/democracia-real-ya-manifiesto.html>.

4 Manifiesto del Grupo Transmaricabollo del Movimiento 15M en Madrid, <http://madrid.tomalaplaza.net/2011/06/03/manifiesto-del-grupo-transmaricabollo-del-movimiento-15m-en-madrid/>.

5 Common Statement of the participants of 15s Hub Meeting, <http://bcnhubmeeting.wordpress.com>.

6 <http://www.democraciarealya.es/manifiesto-comun/manifiesto-english/> or: <http://spanishrevolutionforoutsiders.blogspot.com/p/democracia-real-ya-manifiesto.html>.

7 <http://www.democraciarealya.es/manifiesto-comun/manifiesto-english/> or: <http://spanishrevolutionforoutsiders.blogspot.com/p/democracia-real-ya-manifiesto.html>.