

# The Psych-politics of Austerity; Democracy, Sovereignty and Civic Protest

*Los psico-política de la austeridad; la democracia, la soberanía y la protesta cívica*

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## Abstract

This article argues that new (and sometimes invisible) forms of civic protest are finding a voice in the age of the Internet. It poses the questions whether these voices of protest are (a) part of a long, militant and sometimes violent tradition of street politics based on class struggle or (b) new, peaceful and creative political (and anti-political) platforms (a metaphysical revolt) offering critical and innovative insights into the possibilities of democratic renewal - as part of a process of deepening democracy into more ethical and participatory forms.

Keywords: austerity, civil society, mini-publics, Occupy movement

## Resumen

En este artículo se argumenta que las nuevas (y a veces invisibles) formas de protesta cívica están encontrando voz en la era de internet. Se plantea la cuestión de si estas voces de protesta son (a) parte de una larga, militante y, en ocasiones, violenta tradición de política de la calle basada en la lucha de clases o bien (b) nuevas, pacíficas y creativas plataformas (una revuelta metafísica) políticas (y antipolítica), que ofrece una perspectiva innovadora y crítica respecto a las posibilidades de renovación democrática, como parte de un proceso de profundización de la democracia en formas más éticas y participativas.

Palabras clave: austeridad, sociedad civil, mini-públicos, Movimiento Occupy

The metaphysical rebel protests against the human condition in general.  
Albert Camus (1962)

Saturday 3 December 2011 saw a hugely successful pre-budget 'Parade of Defiance' against the IMF-imposed cuts throughout the streets of Cork. This was a creative protest organised by Occupy Cork to show the city's opposition to austerity measures and to raise our voices together against the undemocratic forcing of these cuts on the people of this country. Between 1,000 and 1,200 people marched behind banners with messages such as 'Not my Debt' and 'This is not a Recession, this is a Robbery'.

Occupy Cork (*Issue 3*, 2011)

The Little People came suddenly. I don't know who they are. I don't know what it means. I was a prisoner of the story [IQ84]. I had no choice. They came, and I described it. That is my work.

Haruki Murakami (*The New York Review of Books*, December 8, 2011)

## INTRODUCTION

Two recent events captured the essence of our times. First, the Occupy Movement which began in Wall Street, New York City, on September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2011, and spread across the world. The message of the Occupy Movement is a simple one. It opposes the austerity measures imposed on ordinary people around the world, the 99% who it argues have been expropriated by the wealthiest 1% of the population. Second, the much anticipated Haruki Murakami novel published in 2011 entitled *IQ84*, while clearly inspired by George Orwell's 1984 allegory about Stalinist tyranny, takes the reader into a counterworld of unreality, where surveillance is all pervasive and the 'Little People' hide from a weirdly unsettling Lewis Carroll wonderland of horrors and the horrifying exercise of power over the mesmerized. Both the Occupy Movement and Murakami's *IQ84* illuminate aspects of the world we currently inhabit: the dominance of unaccountable and largely invisible systems of power but also the willingness of citizens to globally struggle against these dark forces. The 'Little People' have become the «unsignified signifiers» probing behind the mirror of power (Baxter, 2011: 25). In doing so they are rethinking the nature of modernity as an imaginary act. Castoriadis in his book *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (1987) redefined modernity as a struggle between a radical democratic project of autonomy (i.e. personal freedom to determine one's own future without structural manipulation) and the neo-institutional project of mastery of what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their book *Empire* identify as «a decentered and deterritorializing apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global

realm» under «a single rule» (2000: xii). The adoption of the austerity project by the European Union, arguably, has initiated a struggle between the disciplinary agenda of what its critics caricature as the European ‘super-state’ that is being resisted by the ‘Little People’ through civic protest. But is this civic protest simply reactive and defensive against change *or* does it represent a new ethical form of democratic engagement from below? It reminds us of Albert Camus’ (1962) distinction between rebellion as an act of spontaneous protest as opposed to revolution, which implies the transfer of sovereign power to a new regime. In that sense it is very different in its objectives to the Velvet revolutions of Central and Eastern Europe and the Maghreb-Mashreq region.

In this article the author seeks to develop Haruki Murakami’s imagery of the ‘Little People’, probing behind the mirror of power in the context of popular democratic resistance to austerity policies. The author poses two questions. Is civic protest in the twenty-first century simply the latest manifestation of a long tradition of confrontational street politics, dating back to the class warfare of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries *or* does it in the age of the Internet represent a new form of participative democratic politics, that is seeking to ethically challenge elite power and reframe democratic practice?

## 1. THE WILD HYDRA OF INVISIBLE CIVIL SOCIETY

Steinhoff argues that «invisible civil society is the by-product of the decline of the late 1960’s-early 1970’s New Left protest movement» (2015:103). She contends that the stigmatization of the New Left, hierarchical organizations and unpleasant confrontations with the police led to the building of newly conceived mini-publics, made up of networks that constitute an invisible civil society. Steinhoff is commenting from a Japanese perspective, where the mass demonstration has been significantly replaced by a smaller scale organizational form, known as the *shukai* (gathering), composed of like-minded citizens (Steinhoff, 2015). Invisible civil society is also a product of the internet.

One of the defining features of the birth of new political platforms in recent times is the rise of Anonymous which can be dated from 2003 as an internet platform identified as 4chan «specialising in particularly juvenile and malevolent prankishness’ in which users hide behind pseudonyms like weev and dirk digler *or*, more often, posted as the default user: Anonymous» (Gleick, 2004: 36). Its prankster politics graduated from trolling to political activism and, latterly, hacktivism. It is essentially a youth movement (in so far

as it can be described as a social movement) virtually engaged with civil society. Anonymous in its most idealistic form is a forum or platform for the promotion of discursive ethics. But it has another side: pranking the adult world. Its form (or formlessness) leads to the «elimination of the person, and by extension everything associated with it, such as leadership, representation and status» (Coleman 2014, cited in Gleick, 2014: 37). The name (or brand) itself is entirely democratic. Anybody can claim to be 'anonymous'. It is an open participative platform that defies simplistic categorisation as a movement, organisation, party, etc. It is by its very nature ethereal – part of the communicative oxygen. It fits into the genre of invisible civil society activism because it is a communicative space. In this space citizens can safely participate in a surveillance society by wearing (sometimes literally the mask of anonymity) as a protective disguise.

The advent of hacktivism has given Anonymous a new platform, as 'the wily hydra' ever changing its disposition. Hacktivism can be highly political or simply pranksterism. Wikileaks provided a new political direction for Anonymous to express its oppositional politics, which some of its critics regard as cyber-terrorism, because it revealed classified security data about the state. It underlines the connection between Anonymous and cyberspace – the preferred terrain of its engagement. Anonymous has also used its prankster image to forge a new language that reveals a more nihilistic motivation, «I do it for the lulz» (Gleick, 2014: 36). It derives from the internet acronym LOL (laugh out loud) – lulz meaning broadly for the laughs. There is also a subterranean quality to Anonymous that is both its strength and weakness. It is nowhere and everywhere. Anonymous is spontaneous and archaic but also directionless and contentless. Some view pranking as anti-social behaviour in which a 'hacker army' of young people terrorise innocent third parties in a 'wave of cybercrime', evocative of crime and violence on the street. Others view pranking (like graffiti) as an anomic critique of democracy from an alienated youth culture but do not regard it as a serious movement for its reform, renewal or reconstitution (Gleick, 2014). More visible terrestrial social movements have sought to fill this space.

The Occupy movement, *Los Indignados (Spain)* and *Aganaktismenoi (Greece)* have emerged in this carnival atmosphere of political protest as the voice of democracy in the form of a radical civil society. It is a discombobulating mix of the theatrical and theoretical that has been called the 'multitude' (Hardt and Negri, 2004). In a global village, the local camps of the Occupy movement stand out as symbols of protest in a world of financialised capitalism. It also represents what Hardt and Negri term «the mobilization of

the common» in which «the common antagonism and common wealth of the exploited and expropriated are translated into common conduct, habits and performativity» (2004: 211-212). The internet provides the information that the official media suppresses. A painteresque truth is emerging in the sense that our world is composed of «many truths that challenge each other, recoil from each other, reflect from each other, tease each other» (Pinter, 2005). It is difficult separate truth from fiction in this virtual reality.

The Occupy movement, *indignados* and *Aganaktismenoi* have sought to contest official versions of the truth in the interests of public debate aimed at the creation of an ethical civil society, as a basis for ‘democratizing democracy’. The Occupy Wall Street Movement was inspired by the Arab Spring (Van Gelder, 2011; Greenberg, 2011). However, while the occupiers of Tahrir Square had a single and unifying demand of regime change, the Occupy movement sought to create a more metaphysical revolt, by addressing the mind. They viewed their street protest as an antidote to the pollution of our minds by «infotoxins [...] commercial messaging and the [...] financial and ethical catastrophes that loom before humanity» (Greenberg, 2011). The link to Camus’ existential humanism is direct. What the Occupy Wall Street movement and the protesters of Tahrir Square shared was a common mastering of technology through on-line networking sites that enabled them to manage their protests in a unique new way.

The Occupy movement became a global phenomenon. While the Occupy Wall Street movement has been the centre of attention, it was preceded by ‘indignant’ camps in Madrid, Athens, Santiago and Malaysia. The Occupy movements’ unifying theme is economic and social injustice – encapsulated in the slogan 99% are being expropriated by the 1%. This is a powerful message that has attracted popular support, «polls have shown almost twice as many Americans agreed with Occupy Wall Street than disagree with it. Far from alienating middle America, the movement captured the public and political imagination» (Young, 2012: 3). The success of political platforms associated with *Indignados* in local and regional elections in Spain during 2015 also suggests on-going significant popular support (*Guardian*, 6 June 2015). This electoral success is no doubt at least in part directly linked to the suppression of the movement through the closure of street camps’ politically constructing that the law as harsher on protesters than bankers, who the anti-austerity campaigners hold responsible for the Global crisis.

## 2. THE POLITICS OF EUROPEAN PUBLIC OUTRAGE

Stéphane Hessel's *Time of Outrage* (2011) calling on young people to resist alleged state oppression in a similar manner to World War II resistance movements found its answer on the streets across European cities during 2011. Greece and Spain became the main theatres of protest. In Spain *Democracia real ya!* was the slogan of Spanish *indignados* that occupied the Plaza del Sol in Madrid and Plaza de Catalunya in Barcelona and hundreds of squares across the country from the 15<sup>th</sup> May 2011, calling for changes in the social and economic policies and greater participation by citizens in decision-making (della Porta, 2012). In Greece the Aganaktismenoi movement occupied Syntagma square in Athens on the 29<sup>th</sup> June 2011 and engaged in public debate about the consequences of the harsh austerity measures being imposed on the country. The parallels with the classical Athenian *agora*, which met a few hundred metres away, were striking (*Guardian*, 15 June 2011). The daily occupations of Syntagma square often drew crowds of 100,000 citizens to protest. In many other European cities similar protests took place organised by outraged citizens. Their sense of injustice was very real.

At the core of the perceived injustice is the belief that hundreds of millions of euros have been expended on saving commercial banks, while millions of citizens are reduced to poverty. Donatella della Porta has observed that this has led to a public perception of profound social injustice – encapsulated in the metaphor «the abduction of democracy» (2012: 66). The austerity solution to the economic crisis, according to this analysis, is generating a political crisis that is undermining trust in democratic institutions. Della Porta argues that the crisis is delegitimising the elitist model of democracy (based on political parties) because the locus of decision-making has moved elsewhere (Brussels, Berlin, New York) and is no longer responsive to popular concerns. The influence of lobby groups and shadowy powerful interests over politicians has led to perceptions of corruption at the heart of government. Political party funding systems have heightened this distrust because of the influence of ‘oligarchs’. The concentration of media ownership in the hands of wealthy media moguls has further exacerbated public anxiety. Silvio Berlusconi in Italy perhaps best personifies this link between media and politics.

The response to austerity economics has been twofold. The traditional Left has mobilised around strikes, street protests and orchestrated responses to the public expenditure cuts and erosion of labour rights. New social

movements have broadened the struggle into a debate about the nature and meaning of democracy – *Democracia Real Ya!* Their approach seeks not only policy change but greater public participation in the formulation of policy, which digitalisation makes possible. They have put Claus Offe's meta-question of democracy at the centre of the debate by challenging the boundaries of institutional politics (della Porta, 2012). Della Porta observes:

[...] the *indignados* discourse on democracy is articulated and complex, taking up some of the principal criticisms of the ever-decreasing quality of representative democracies, but also some of the main proposals inspired by other democratic qualities beyond electoral representation. These proposals resonate with (more traditional) participatory visions, but also with new deliberative conceptions that underline the importance of creating multiple public spaces, egalitarian but plural (2012: 66).

The issue is the quality of individual citizen's personal democratic experiences and the need for political elites to actively engage with citizens voices. The outraged movement is reportedly supported by 90% of citizens in Spain and Greece (Della Porta, 2012: 67). Trust in European institutions arguably will not be fully restored until democratic engagement takes place around the question what it means to be a citizen in the twenty-first century. This is the biggest challenge facing European civil society in contemporary reality, since it is existentially founded on the right to associate as the cornerstone of democratic practice (Powell, 2013). That is the meta-question of democracy.

### 3. THE META- QUESTION OF DEMOCRACY

Democracy is about humanity's desire to nurture a public sphere for the common good. But there political contestation begins. Truth is shaped by ideology (Pinter, 2005). Because we live in an era when wealth is once again in the ascendant, we should not be blinded by its truths. Thomas Piketty in his best-selling book *Capital in the twenty-first Century* (2014), based on data from twenty countries and with a historic analysis reaching back to the eighteenth century, has sought to establish long-term economic and social patterns. He adopts a simple and, in social justice terms, pessimistic formula to explain economic inequality:  $r > g$  (meaning that return on capital is generally higher than economic growth). The import of Piketty's analysis is that while the apocalyptic predictions of Karl Marx of the gradual immiseration of the population may have been avoided by economic growth and the diffusion of knowledge, inequality is growing. The logic behind Piketty's argu-

ment suggests that the optimism that accompanied the welfare state, as a social compromise between capital and labour, was not founded on a solid long term redistributive base. The pessimism of Piketty's analysis raises existential questions for democracy in general and social democracy in particular. If it is impossible to create greater equality, what is the point in democracy? Is the elite model of representative democracy undemocratic? Is there a crisis of trust at the core of institutional politics, which is corrupting our political institutions from the inside? What is the truth behind Offe's (1985) meta-question of democracy in terms of citizen's capacities to change the boundaries of institutional politics? Is political agency simply a Quixotic fantasy that should be disregarded as hopelessly idealistic at best and anomic pranking of the system at worst? Or does democratic protest speak truth to power by articulating the two-sided nature of sovereignty, which involves constant struggle (Hardt and Negri, 2004).

John Keane in his important book *The Life and Death of Democracy* locates its origins in Ancient Athens (2009). The *agora* (a site of political assembly or marketplace) became a metaphor for Greek civil society as Greece evolved into city states from about 700 BC. Keane concludes «through their public encounters in the agora, Athenians could feel their power, their ability to speak to each other, to act with and against their fellow citizens, in pursuit of commonly defined ends» (2009:14). The *agora* enabled mini-publics to participate in the democratic process. This made it immediate, accountable and transparent. Steinhoff in a comment on the benefits of political participation through the agency of protest in contemporary society argues: (1) participation fulfils deep psychological needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness, and (2) social movement research indicates that participation «generates collective identity, solidarity, and commitment, which in turn produces social and emotional well-being» (2015: 101-104). Civic protest also goes to the core of the democratic project, as a two-sided dialogue between the people and power that is in essence an on-going political drama about sovereignty.

Drama, like democracy, is a product of Ancient Greece in terms of our contemporary understanding of it as an art form involving a performance and audience. There are two dramatic forms: tragedy and comedy. The three great Greek tragedians were: Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, who successively moved the focus of their art from the divine to the human. Greek comedy is divisible into 'old comedy' and 'new comedy'. Aristophanes (c444-385BCE) was the master of old comedy who wrote forty-four plays, eleven of which survive. His satirical drama combines risqué wit and humour with



intense invective against his enemies in a search for truth. While a conservative by disposition, Aristophanes used the dramatic form to expose abuses of power and privilege. On the other hand, the 'new comedy' more closely resembles comedy as human paradox and farce that we associate with much of modern apolitical comedy. But political comedy is still very much alive.

The most current example of political drama is the victory of the radical-minded Syriza party in the 2015 Greek General Elections. It was an epic political event dubbed 'the Red Spring'. The Syriza leader, Alexis Tsipras (as Greek Prime Minister) compared his political movement's victory to the inexorable forward force of an ancient Greek drama (*Guardian* Editorial 31 January 2015). Invoking Aristotle's analysis he argued that the tragedy of austerity (the hubris of neo-liberalism) would be followed by nemesis (EU political failure) and ultimately catharsis in the form of democratic renewal. Alexis Tsipras proclaimed: «Because Greece is the county of Sophocles, who taught us with his Antigone that there are moments in which the supreme law is justice» (*Guardian* 31 January 2015). He was referring to Antigone's defiance of the king (her uncle) that her dead brother should be denied the civility of a burial. Her actions are justified on the basis that power can be trumped by the higher law of justice. In Sophocles' Greek tragedy Antigone speaks truth to power by her brave defiance of the king.

The parallels between Antigone's struggle for justice and Syriza's challenge to the EU austerity policies is unmistakable. Alexis Tsipras has attracted the world's attention by speaking truth to power in the cause of social justice. Of course, there is wide speculation that Syriza's defiance will end as another Greek tragedy. Yet this contemporary political drama reminds us that there are deep roots in European civilisation that lead back to Athenian democracy. Civility emerged in classical culture as the basis of community, social stability and mutual dependence. Citizens internalised social and cultural codes of behaviour that enabled them to communicate non-violently with neighbours and strangers – agreeing to disagree – in conflict-free communicative zones (Anheier, 2010). Civility is the cornerstone of civil society because of its association with the civilising process (Elias, 1994). Anheier concludes that «civility creates predictability and builds social capital through successful encounters» (2010: 477). In summary, civility provides the communicative competencies and spaces upon which civil society is constructed. Aristotle (384-322BCE) in both his *Politics* and *Nicomachean Ethics* identifies political community as supreme (Molnar, 2010). Greek democracy became the defining event in European political formation. Its rootedness is the fundamental human right to association, which has, argu-

ably, been lost in the era of representative democracy dominated by elites. However, a vibrant set of social movements is challenging European political elites in new dramatic forms.

#### 4. AUSTERITY, POLITICAL FICTION AND DEMOCRATIC RENEWAL

Ireland as another ‘Bailout’ state that is also at the epicentre of the European austerity programme. While the country successfully ended the terrorist war in Northern Ireland through the 1998 Belfast Agreement, economic hybris had created a new crisis of unparalleled proportions. During the Celtic Tiger imaginary, arguably the Irish became self-absorbed subjects (consumer citizens) rather than active citizens engaged in society. It was a perfect fantasy land – beyond the reach of reality, in which Ireland borrowed from the future in a wager that it lost. Prosperity transformed Ireland from an under-development to Asian Tiger style economy (Powell, 1992; Powell and Geoghegan, 2004; Powell, 2012).

Unlike Greece, Ireland has responded to its ‘Bailout’ with the fatalistic resignation of a sinner and accepted its creditors imposition of ‘responsibilisation’ for the country’s debt, rather than allocating responsibility to the European commercial banking sector that has arguably caused the crisis in peripheral nations through profligate lending. Apart from the Occupy Movement there was initially very limited opposition to the draconian policies of the ‘Bailout’ imposed on domestic social expenditure, leading to: cuts in public sector pay; increases in teacher: pupil ratios in schools; lengthening hospital waiting lists and rising health insurance costs, rising unemployment (over 14% of the workforce) and retrenchment in social welfare payments.

A general election in 2011 resulted in the Fianna Fail/Green Coalition being ejected from power. Fianna Fail (a populist centre-right party) was reduced to a parliamentary rump. The Greens were wiped out losing all of their seats in the Dail (parliament). But they were replaced by Fine Gael-led government supported by a minority centre-left Labour Party. Fine Gael like Fianna Fail is also a centre-right party. Both share a common history in the nationalist Sinn Fein (Ourselves) movement, having split following the partition of Ireland in the early 1920s. The Fine Gael-Labour government promised a ‘democratic revolution’ based upon political reform. Labour had been elected on a Syriza-style promise of ‘Labour’s way, not Frankfurt’s way’. However, any renegeing on bondholders was quickly ruled out. The new govern-

ment accepted the terms of the 'Bailout' without equivocation from the start of their tenure in office.

This strategy has been supported by the political fiction that the 'Bailout' has been a success. Ireland can afford to repay its debts. In 2014 Ireland paid 7.5 billion to service debts of 214 billion compared with Greece, which paid 8 billion to service debts of 315 billion (O'Toole, 2015). The political fiction is underpinned by the myth that Ireland is a rich Northern European country that is prudently paying the costs of the failure of its private banks. In reality, the previous government (allegedly under pressure from the European Central Bank) transferred private bank debts to the citizens in a decision that raises fundamental questions regarding democratic process. The result of this decision transferred Ireland's sovereignty in terms of taxation and fiscal policy to the Troika (EU, ECB, IMF).

The consequences have been draconian as the Irish government seeks to combine major cuts in public expenditure with rises in taxation. The introduction of a property charge led to significant protest. But it was the introduction of a water charge (tax) during 2014 that finally galvanised public opinion against austerity policies. Several hundreds of thousands of citizens took to the streets in a series of protests that have continued into 2015. Streets protests were accompanied by a sharp decline in support for mainstream political parties and a growth in support for left-wing populist parties and independents. Many citizens are experiencing a profound disenchantment with politics and political institutions. The water charge has been significantly scaled back with bills arriving on a quarterly basis to minimise their impact. Many citizens have refused to register for the water charge as a protest against austerity. More significantly, there has been a significant erosion in the electoral dominance of the main stream political parties, with one-third of the electorate opting for independent candidates in recent opinion polls.

In post Celtic Tiger Ireland, the citizens are experiencing what Slavoj Žižek calls 'The *real real*' (2011), which he likens to the horror in a horror film. The line between politics and fantasy has become blurred in Ireland's contemporary reality. This presents citizens with a series of questions:

- How can they overcome being subjects?
- How do they restore content to the democratic imaginary?
- How do they deal with the legacy of the 2008 crash?

The Irish President, poet and intellectual Michael D. Higgins, advocates as an alternative to the deeply compromised status quo a creative society constructed from the bottom-up:

[...] the creative society cannot be imposed from above; it is built on creativity made possible by sustainable communities. Properly respected, the cultural space can be an invitation to push the boundaries of the possible – enfranchising us all in our capacity for living, and enriching the social and economic life of the nation (Higgins, 2011: 22).

The President argues that the alternative is Žižek's (2011) apocalyptic vision, outlined in his book *Living in the End Time*:

Should the adjustment in economic and social assumptions prove to be incapable of being made, we probably face an unmediated confrontation between the excluded and those who chose to be unconcerned. Such a point is the one at which the dark prescriptions of Slavoj Žižek become relevant. Around the world there is evidence that such an outcome is achieving momentum, and some support (Higgins, 2011: 62).

The challenge that President Higgins has presented is essentially about the need for a new political project in post-Bailout Ireland to take the narrative of democracy forward. It is very clearly framed within the language of civil society: community, inclusive citizenship and sustainability.

Arguably, President Higgins' vision of a political rupture generated by bottom-up forces within civil society points to the social left, as opposed to the political left, as the drivers of change in post-politics society. The Occupy movement (which experienced suppression in New York, London and Dublin) is the most visible contemporary manifestation of the social left as an actor in redefining politics. In response to the eviction of protestors from the grounds of St Paul's Cathedral the *Guardian* (29 February 2012) declared on its front page:

You cannot evict an idea. Such is the message of defiance from Occupy. But it is not entirely true. For the whole point of Occupy is that it's not just an idea bouncing around the internet. Occupy is stubbornly about the physical reality of space. Others may write books and organise seminars. Occupy puts up tents. It takes up space. It is there.

Sarah van Gelder likens the Occupy Movement to the Arab Spring and argues that its name identifies the cause of the current crisis: «Wall street banks, big corporations, and others among the 1% are claiming the world's wealth for themselves at the expense of the 99% and having their way with governments» (2011: 1). What is refreshing about the Occupy Movements is their determination to link their political critique of capitalism to practical

welfare initiatives aimed at the socially excluded. Despite their chaos they genuinely represent a search for truth through civic protest and metaphysical rebellion.

President Higgin's concept of a 'creative society' has been taken up by the Cork Occupy Movement as a philosophical basis of their protest:

A hugely important aspect of the protest was the involvement of Cork Community Art Link, who brought a real creative and artistic colour to the demonstration. This combines the importance of our presence on the South Mall in the heart of the city with an appreciation of the need to move in more creative directions, opening up the Occupy movement to all. This is about making the movement accessible and welcoming to all, and bringing that together with the principles of equality and democracy that are central to what we do. In a time where there is such an overwhelming amount and range of advertising constantly being forced down our throats, we need to work in ways that really engage with people, and the wide and open nature of the Occupy movement is bringing something really new to the table.

Creative protests such as the Parade are testament to a *DIY* ethic producing our own culture, one that can be defiant through creativity, but this shouldn't be seen as the be-all and end-all of how we're to organise ourselves for this fight. We should not feel bound to the past to feel we owe today's struggle to those who've come before us – we should try to see ourselves within the tradition of human beings standing up for potent ideas of justice, equality and dignity. How we interpret that challenge of building a new society should be across the whole spectrum of human capacity – the creative and cultural shouldn't be seen as opposed to the political, to the practical task of organising and mobilising in cooperation with one another, against those whose interests are currently served by our rights being stamped on (Occupy Cork, Issue 3, 2011: 11).

The Occupy Movement is part of an anti-austerity counter-fiction that is creating a participative democratic narrative in which citizens are being invited to become actors in making their own history. It suggests that we are experiencing 'the democratisation of democracy' in response to the invisibility of autocratic power that seeks to discursively mould contemporary political reality and fails. It fails because democracy is foundationally constructed on dialogue between citizens within the *POLIS*.

## 5. STRONG DEMOCRACY: BEYOND POLITICAL ZOOLOGY

Benjamin Barber laments the erosion of democracy from within, through the triumph of thin (representative) democracy – which in his view marginalises citizens from the decision-making process and undermines popular sovereignty. He likens this process to 'politics as zookeeping', in which «de-

mocracy is undone by a hundred kinds of activity more profitable than citizenship; by a thousand seductive acquisitions cheaper than liberty» (Barber, 1984: xvii). Thin democracy shifts popular power to distant elite representative institutions, far from communities where citizens live. Instead of participation in decision making, citizens are reduced to a passive state like animals in a zoo waiting for their keepers to decide their lives for them. Strong democracy envisages the participation of all the citizenry in at least some aspects of governance at least some of the time. It is an act of «democratizing democracy» (Santos, 2006). Civil society opens up the public realm to the possibility of participative democracy because it embraces the mobilization of the sovereignty of 'the commonwealth' in the form of people power (Hardt and Negri, 2009).

Strong democracy offers society the choice of taking responsibility for the democratic restoration that has the potential to give substance to the somewhat hackneyed slogan 'power to the people'. Prugh, Constanza, and Daly have asserted that strong democracy offers immediate advantages over the 'thin democracy' of the representative variety, emphasising (i) the sociality of the conception of a social 'us' inherent in notions of community; (ii) the dispersal and redistribution of power away from special interests; and (iii) engaging citizens in the challenges and problems of governance (Prugh et al., 2000). They add: «we need politics of engagement, not a politics of consignment» (Prugh et al., 2000: 220).

We live in a world where many active citizens are concerned to address the democratic deficits that have arisen in the period of globalisation. Participation has become a pivotal concern. Young (2000: 9-10) asserts that «beyond membership and voting rights, inclusive democracy enables participation and voice for all those affected by problems and their proposed solutions». In essence, this is a statement of strong democracy. It promotes participation and inclusion. In contrast, thin democracy leaves it to political elites to speak for us and represent our interests. There is a fundamental issue of political equality and republican respect in question here. Moreover, there is an issue of trust and toleration that defines pluralistic democracy. The reality is that not everybody is given equal voice in liberal democratic societies. Monarchy survives in its exalted role a wholly undemocratic institution based on the most extreme form of exclusion – blood lineage. But perhaps more troubling is the role of the oligarchies of power and wealth in manufacturing consensus, through their capacity to monopolise the media and purchase political influence. In this hierarchal world of power, exclusion is rife. As Young puts it, «perhaps the most pervasive and insidious form of

external exclusion in modern democracies is what I referred to as the ability for economically or socially powerful actors also to exercise political domination» (2000: 54). She asserts that «one task of democratic civil society is to explore and criticise exclusions such as these, and doing so sometimes effectively challenge the legitimacy of institutional rules and their decision» (Young, 2000: 55). The above critique of the limits of democratic inclusion begs the question, 'Is there any point in participation?' Some commentators suggest that there may not be any value in participation and add that it is unreasonable to push people in that direction (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). They view the postmodern political landscape as barren and civil society as a meaningless concept. On the other hand, Ramirez contends that in the task of confronting global hegemonic forces and forging a new grammar of democracy to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century, local and popular movements are opening up new democratic spaces for participation that are effectively counteracting the more extreme forms of exclusion and erosion of citizen's political, social and economic rights (2006).

## CONCLUSIONS

'Austerity' now has a ring of a funeral dirge for democracy. The undertakers have come in the form of the Troika (EU, ECB, IMF). The grief reaction among the citizens for their lost sovereignty has varied from denial through, anger (Greece) to despairing acceptance (Ireland). There is a rupture with the welfare state but with no clear vision of the future that isn't profoundly anti-democratic. In the circumstances, Benjamin Barber (1984) has advocated to citizens that they have the power to construct their own future by replacing thin democracy by strong democracy. His democratic vision is for a bottom-up renewal of popular sovereignty. He wants citizens to forge their own democratic narrative, in which they once again become sovereign in making our own history. We are invited by Barber to deepen our democracy, think for ourselves, and shape our own destiny. Oddly, this sounds strangely counter-intuitive. Like Benjamin Barber's caged animals, we don't like to leave the comfort of the cage. Somehow, we remain mesmerised like the characters in Haruki Murakami's novel, *IQ84*. But there are voices of protest: *the Akanaktismenoi*, *Los Indignados* and the Occupy Movement. The Occupy Movement has attracted public support because its members dared to step outside their personal cages and enter the public sphere. Syriza has been elected to power in Greece. Podemos challenges for power in Spain.

They have been making democratic noises, which their critics within the European elite judge to be an unreasonable provocation of the citizens. Despite their public support, their protest is being challenged by European Union. The anti-austerity movement resembles those campaigns for the right of association that gave birth to democracy during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. That resulted in the twentieth-century welfare state, the purportedly good society that benefited citizens, even if it failed to stem long-term inequality. It too is being suppressed in the era of austerity economics, however successful and compatible with a burgeoning economy and socially affordable. Social justice is a forbidden language in the twenty-first century. The Troika undertakers – those global civil servants – point toward the cages, where the living dead are to be consigned. But the citizens have started to climb out and seek freedom through greater social justice.

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