

Spectres Of The Common – The Italian Theatre Spring And The Global Protest Movements

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Primavera 2011, Mediterraneo ed Europa in subbuglio. Milioni di italiani vanno a votare quattro Sì al referendum e il giorno dopo si entra al Valle. Dopo poco arrivano giornalisti, politici e soprattutto cittadini, tanti cittadini. Artisti, addetti ai lavori, spettatori appassionati del teatro, curiosi ed esasperati di ogni genere. Tutte le sere pieno fino al loggione, tutti i giorni centinaia di persone alle assemblee cittadine.¹

Spring 2011, the Mediterranean area and Europe is in revolt. Millions of Italians vote “YES” at the referendum and on the next day, Teatro Valle is occupied. Later, journalists, politicians and citizens will arrive: so many citizens. Artists, art workers, theatre loving spectators, curious and outraged people of all ages and backgrounds. Every night is completely sold out, every day hundreds of people are at the public assemblies.

The beginning of the small anthology, *Teatro Valle Occupato. La rivolta culturale dei beni comuni*, sounds enthusiastic. In an empathetic tone it talks about that famous day, June 14th 2011, when Roman artists, students and activists occupied the reputable Teatro Valle, which by that time was threatened with privatization and closure.

This autobiographical report of the Valle activists preserves a little bit of the revolutionary verve with which, since 2011, a good dozen theatres and cultural spaces in Italy have been occupied, renovated, redesigned, performed in and above all permanently revived. The occupation of Teatro Valle unleashed a veritable storm of protest, which the Italian press has meaningfully baptized “primavera dei teatri” – the Italian Theatre Spring. Who were the actors of this protest movement, where and how did it take place?

In the summer of 2011, just after the occupation of Teatro Valle, the network “Lavoratori dell’Arte”, a nationwide association of independent cultural workers, published the Art Workers’ Document, a proper manifesto. In this document they formulated the decisive issues of the movement, issues which the occupiers of Teatro Valle shared with their successors at Teatro Marinoni Venice, Teatro Garibaldi Palermo, the Ex Asilo Filangeri in Naples and other occupied spaces. QUOTE 2:

In risposta all’attuale situazione [...], i lavoratori del settore hanno messo in discussione i processi istituzionali di produzione culturale, sollevando le problematiche del rapporto tra arte e sfera pubblica. [...] Riconosciamo la produzione artistica e culturale come produzione comune, ovvero come frutto dell’incontro tra la singolarità e la dimensione sociale, cooperante e collettiva. Riteniamo che questa produzione comune debba essere affermata contro la sua appropriazione privatistica. Gli strumenti di questa ri-appropriazione devono essere

In response to the current situation [...] the workers of the sector have put up for discussion the institutional processes of cultural production, problematizing at the same time the relation between the arts and the public sphere. [...] We recognise the artistic and cultural production as a common one, or, in other words, as a result of the encounter between the singularity and the social, collaborative and collective dimension. [...] This does not at all intend the benefits of a welfare state but a form of society which fully recognises the social, relational and

nuove forme di reddito e un nuovo welfare. Un welfare che non è assistenzialista, ma che riconosce pienamente il carattere sociale, reticolare, comune dell'atto di creazione.² collective character of the creative act.

The occupied theatre buildings were designated as commons, freely accessible and commonly usable, but above all self-administrated and self-maintained spaces of co-working and co-habiting, which should escape from the vicious circle of privatization and opaque state distribution. Cultural workers and citizens wanted to open up these spaces to community building processes, to common living and doing outside of economic constraints and social hierarchies. Thus every place developed its own, often long-term strategies of self-organized administration, funding and use.

The ongoing success of some of the actors of the Italian Theatre Spring, the acknowledgement of some of these projects by local politics and last but not least the reception of the debate on the commons in the juridical academic discourse convey the idea that the movement, beyond the prevailing context of protest, has touched on wider questions of society and citizenship.

Indeed, a report commissioned by the former roman cultural assessor Barca evaluates the case of the Roman theatre as the QUOTE „emblematic place of cultural, social, political and discursive practices of negotiation and experiment”³ which hints at a different concept of citizenship.⁴ Likewise, the few non-Italian commentators on the movement associate it with more than mere local and temporary tumult. QUOTE 3:

L'occupazione del teatro a Roma è un evento unico. Un evento però che potrebbe dar nascita ad un nuovo movimento socio-culturale in Europa e al di là.

The theatre occupation in Rome is a singular event. An event though that could incite a new socio-cultural movement – all over Europe and beyond.⁵

Why has there been so much enthusiasm, so many big words and empathetic announcements concerning the Italian Theatre Spring?

Trying to answer this question means exposing several levels of structure, action and meaning, which eventually suggest the socio-historical and epistemological conditions of the Italian Theatre Spring. Some of these conditions get consciously reflected and exploited by the movement itself, whereas others remain latent and invisible.

First of all – and this is a point that the discourses of the movement itself consciously stress –, the Theatre Spring was an *uprising* against the economic, social and moral casualization of artistic professions. In its mode of criticism, the movement struggled for a complete revision

of the material, infrastructural and immaterial conditions of cultural production. It was aimed at revivifying the cultural sphere as a space for social life and production. This desire has been repeatedly uttered and continuously discussed in manifestos, rallies and online video or text statements. Referring to strategies of the historical ‘urban social movements’, the actors of the Italian Theatre Spring denounced the different forms of [I QUOTE] “an expropriation of the common” and claimed a “real social alternative”. Firmly believing in a possible realization, they designed future societies, where the traditional dichotomies of public and private, State and market, representation and economisation would be undermined. They conjured up a self-emancipated civil society as the subject of their utopia. Autonomously resigned from the depriving realm of state-market-dualism, this society would be supposed to take effect against the often-called ‘neoliberal’ fragmentation of the social bond by an enlightened and ecological practice of living. These kinds of directives reveal the *critical* dimension of the movement, critical in the Marxist sense of ‘performative social criticism’. They delimit the *critical* project and constitute the ‘materialized’, visible and in a way institutionalized part of the movement.

At the same time there seems to be a second level lying underneath the conscious discourses of the movement, a level which is not easily reducible to the conventional formulas of social criticism. If you analyse *how* the texts, statements and manifestos of the movement work on a linguistic, pragmatic and strategic level, you will state that they remarkably aspire to build, shape and fix new philosophical or sociological concepts (such as “Fifth Estate”, “cultural commons” or “participatory practices”). You can feel a veritable struggling for a new performative terminology. Why is this so? I suppose that there is a wider, less palpable experience in our contemporary constellation that makes people long for fixed, manifest and exploitable concepts, especially in their social or political struggle for recognition. A common experience that has hitherto been lying underneath the threshold of discursivity.

This kind of experience seems to be referred to in statements like the following. It is a typical example of the uncountable journalistic or scientific comments that subsume the Italian Theatre Spring into a whole series of contemporary protest movements. QUOTE 5:

Thailand, the Philippines, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, the United States, Mexico, France, England, Italy, Greece. Everywhere in the world a spectre is rising, the revenant spectre of a human crowd calling for change.

Thailand, die Philippinen, Tunesien, Ägypten, Libyen, die Vereinigten Staaten, Mexiko, Frankreich, England, Italien, Griechenland. Überall in der Welt erhebt sich das wiederkehrende Gespenst einer Menschenmenge, die Veränderung fordert.⁶

I want to attract your attention to the word “spectre”. This remarkable metaphor makes a whole series of events – including the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, the Syntagma movement and other protests – appear in front of the rather fuzzy background of a scarcely defined concept of communism. It underlines just in the way Marx’ famous diagnosis from 1848 did, that this series of events can hardly be described through a clearly defined common denominator. The metaphor of the spectre makes the invisible relation between the enumerated settings appear as something that at the same time *is* and *is not*, something that is at the same time recurring and unreachable, that is constantly repeating itself, though every time in a different and unpredictable manner.

Assuming that every single one of these places will have developed its own locally specified discourses – comparable but still heterogeneous to the ones of the Italian Theatre– there still seems to be an experience that these movements share, an experience that is probably hard to say and explain but still *common*. What is this previous, and in its ‘previousness’, common experience?

Let us have a look into one of the few theoretically ambitioned descriptions of the Italian Theatre Spring QUOTE 6:

In una stagione storica profondamente segnata dalla crisi [...] l’esperienza dei teatri liberati [...] si inserisce in un’onda lunga che sta germogliando nelle piazze spagnole a partire dal movimento del 15M, passando per la New York di Occupy Wall Street, attraversando piazza Syntagma in Grecia e arrivando alle coste del nord Africa lungo le quali ha cominciato a fiorire tenace una cultura del cambiamento che rivendica dritti e libertà.⁷

In a time profoundly marked by crisis [...] the experience of the freed theatres is part of goes down into a long wave of protest that had already stirred in the Spanish squares and the 15M movement before affecting the New York of Occupy Wall Street, crossing Syntagma square in Greece and finally arriving at the North African coasts, where a tender culture of change, demanding rights and freedom, started to bloom.

As with the quote with the metaphor of the spectre, this passage asserts a relation between the different settings that is not further defined. Yet, this time, the Spanish squares, New York’s Occupy Wall Street and Syntagma square are not amalgamated in the figure of a ghostly, over-individualised mass subject, but due to their common experience of *crisis*. Like the spectre in the passage quoted above, the concept of crises remains undefined for the time being and leaves the reader to ask: Which experience, which experiences, which constellations of experience, are included in the discursive parameter “crisis”?

Contemporary protest movements are born of an experience of crisis in a double manner. On the one hand they represent, as explained above, spatiotemporally limited reactions to relatively clearly identifiable deficiencies, for example casualization, exploitation, indebtedness, deprivation of fundamental rights and so on.

On the other hand, I think, these protests depend on an experience of crisis because they try to cope with the consequences of a turning point (crisis). This turning point has been registered in the history books by the decline of real socialism and it has been given different names by several contemporary philosophers, according to their prevailing ideological tendencies or habits: Lyotard assumes an end of grand narratives, Derrida speaks of the overcoming of the eschato-teleological paradigm, and German sociologist Oliver Marchart invents the concept of post-fundamentalism.

To my mind, the worldwide emerging protests can and should be read as search movements in a constellation that does not offer any more unambiguous ideological, eschatological ontological models and that therefore raises the question “how to live together?” more radically than ever before. As a consequence, Tahir and Valle, Wall Street and Maidan would – not only but also – [I QUOTE] “symptomatically hint at the crisis of the fundamentalist horizon of thinking”⁸. Present-day protest movements correspond to one another as they all search for possibilities of another living together, which starts out from the impossibility of [I QUOTE] “metaphysical figures of foundation and meaning, [of] figures such as totality, universality, substance, essence, subject or structure, but also market, genes, sex and gender, skin colour, cultural identity, state, nation, etc.”

Searching for alternative, sustainable, open and different ways of living, working and being together, these movements have opened up spaces in which the question “how to live together” is reformulated and realised again and again, always under the undeniable condition of a missing common denominator. In this sense, their struggle for a stable and user-friendly terminological and practical toolbox is due the general experience of a *common* that cannot be substantially defined or ‘tamed’ in conventional ideological concepts. The ‘common’ seems to leave a trace in the strategic, critical and consciously built discourses of these movements, but itself remains ‘spectral’, latent, unsayable. This is not due to diagnostic weakness or analytical imprecision of the discourse-makers, but must be seen as a tribute to the challenge of thinking the “being-in-common” without a common foundation, without [I QUOTE] “the concept and the reassuring radiance of a purpose, without knowledge, without the synthesizing power of a conjunction”⁹, that means under the condition of a radical plurality.

How should we as observers, thinkers and commenters of these movements react to the double-bound structure of the contemporary protest movements? I think, that an analysis of a

contemporary protest movement, be it the Italian Theatre Spring or any other, should manage to track, in its various concrete and critical modes of speaking, thinking and action, the trail of the ‘spectre of the common’. Trying to hear the desire for a being-in-common without a common denominator, without name and unifying purpose, it might become receptive for deeper transformations that concern our culture of sense and meaning and thus our perception of ourselves, of how we do things, how we feel, hope, suffer and so on.

French philosopher Judith Revel for instance manages, starting from the concrete critical debate on common goods and alluding to a wider concept of the common, to sketch an epistemic shift that concerns the contemporary concept of politics and the political QUOTE 7:

Today, to fight against private property is to demand the right to reclaim, non-individually and not in terms of state ownership, the social production that everyone in her/his own way permits. [...] Our common is not our foundation but our production, our constantly renewed invention. The common is the refusal of an origin, it is the identification of being and creating and producing, it is the will to exist both singularly (but without private property: never ‘alone’) and commonly (but never ‘collectively’: without reducing our many differences to the unity of the state or a party); [...] [it] implies a redefinition of space.¹⁰

Speaking of “a redefinition of space”, Revel indicates the very process through which [I QUOTE] “political thinking reinvents itself as a thinking of the political”¹¹. In the post-fundamentalist situation, politics cannot anymore be thought exclusively in terms of [I QUOTE] “party and the execution of power, daily government action and the usual institutional life”, but have to be considered in the way Hannah Arendt formulated in 1950 and that contemporary theorists of the political difference address under the noun “the political” (*le politique*) QUOTE 8:

Politik beruht auf der Tatsache der Pluralität der Menschen. [...] Politik handelt von dem Zusammen- und Miteinandersein der *Verschiedenen*. [...] Politik entsteht in dem *Zwischen-den-Menschen*, also durchaus *außerhalb* des Menschen. Es gibt daher keine eigentliche politische Substanz. Politik entsteht im Zwischen und etabliert sich als der Bezug.¹²

I therefore think – and with this I would like to conclude – that many present-day protest movements, among others the Italian Theatre Spring, exceed the level of social criticism precisely by coping with the impossibility of political substance. Exposed to the radical openness of the coming, they try to prepare the terrain for what is to come, thinking and protecting the polyphony of its possibilities in temporary, experimental, processual and open constellations.

This is why the various models of a pluralistic living together, which the protest movements have elaborated, discussed and practiced in often quite small cells, for example in an occupied theatre building, should perhaps be considered utopias in a mode of *question* rather than

projects in a mode of *realization*. They open up spaces that can be called democratic in as much as they provide a stage for the emergence of a political in the widest possible sense.

This could explain the empathetic tone of those who might have felt this deeper transformation in the occupied theatre buildings. Surely it is the reason why the protest movements are often amalgamated in their vague structural and thematic correspondences.

But above all, it tells us to take the vague relation between the worldwide movements seriously and urgently reminds us not to, on any account, prey upon the spectre of the common, not by manifesto, nor by a party, nor by any other instrument of ontological, discursive, institutional or historiographical fixation.

¹ Mattei, Ugo, Federica Giardini, Rafael Spregelburd u.a.: *Teatro Valle Occupato. La rivolta culturale dei beni comuni*. Rom: DeriveApprodi, 2012.

² Laboratori dell'Arte (Hg.): „Documento dei Laboratori dell'Arte“. In: *undo.net*. 22. Juli 2011. Online: <http://www.undo-net/it/argomenti/1311340171> (31.12.2015). Meine Hervorhebung. Engl. Version a.a.O. Für den ersten Hinweis auf das später immer wieder in meinen Recherchen auftauchende Dokument danke ich Valeska Klug.

³ ebd. S. 4.

⁴ ebd. S.14.

⁵ Karschnia, Alexander: „Kahlschlag am Theater: Die Kulturkonterrevolution ist auf dem Vormarsch“. In: *Berliner Gazette*, 13.09.2011. Online: <http://berlingazette.de/theater-niederlande-italien-kulturkonterrevolution/> (03.01.2016).

⁶ Morris, Rosalind C.: „Thesen zur neuen Öffentlichkeit.“ Aus dem Englischen von Gaby Gehlen. In: *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft*. Bd. 7/2012. Zürich: 2012. S. 115-131.S. 115.

⁷ Jop, Silvia (Hg.): *Com'è bella l'imprudenza. Arti e teatri in rete: una cartografia dell'Italia che torna scena*. E-Book, realisiert und herausgegeben mit Unterstützung des Blogs www.lavoroculturale.org. Verfügbar unter: <http://www.lavoroculturale.org/imprudenza/> (16.01.2016). Prefazione. Meine Hervorhebung.

⁸ Marchart, Oliver: *Politische Differenz. Zum Denken des Politischen bei Nancy, Lefort, Badiou, Laclau und Agamben*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010. S. 15.

⁹ Derrida, Jacques (1993): *Marx Gespenster. Der Staat der Schuld, die Trauerarbeit und die neue Internationale*. Aus dem Französischen von Susanne Lüdemann. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004.S. 49.

¹⁰ Revel, Judith: „The Common - A Political Construction“. In: *Depletion Design. A Glossary of Network Ecologies*. Hg. v. Carolin Wiedemann u. Soenke Zehle. Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2012. S. 23-25.

¹¹ Marchart, Oliver: *Politische Differenz. Zum Denken des Politischen bei Nancy, Lefort, Badiou, Laclau und Agamben*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010. S. 8.

¹² Arendt, Hannah (1950): „Was ist Politik?“ In dies.: *Fragmente aus dem Nachlaß*. Hg. v. Ursula Ludz. München, Piper. S. 9-11.