The Indignants of Athens as a Multitude of Singularities

Mapping the Common Actions of an Emerging Socio-Political

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Social uprisings worldwide

During the last two decades, a new type of political claim has been created worldwide; from Argentina and the Trueke market, the revolts in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain and Yemen, to the occupy movements of indignant people in Puerta del Sol in Madrid, in Syntagma Square in Athens, and in the Liberty Plaza in New York, the multitude has been at the centre not only of the corresponding local squares, but of the global political developments as well. The protests do not anymore have the form that they used to have, but have extended the limits of political and social action. Those acts have inaugurated a different way to perceive the meaning of democracy; they stand up for a social and political life without representation, in a public space that belongs to those who are currently using it. Moreover, the movements of the squares worldwide do not constitute a whole of isolated incidents. The contemporary squares represent a specific form of activation of the societies and, at the same time, their collective formation into political subjects that bring historical changes.

Even though the units that constitute the collectivities of each square are independent and creative, they may be considered weak. The greatness of this social movement is revealed when the detached individuals connect with each other producing a multiple cooperative collectivity and finally common space.

That common space, which was created every single day in Syntagma Square, has developed new spiral, relational negotiations with the emerging subjectivities (Hardt and Negri 2004). It will be shown that the

urban space these have created is relational; it is based on open negotiations and interactions. Contemporary urban space can be understood only in these terms, as a result of interrelations and interdependence. As Doreen Massey maintains, the social develops in the spatial, but also the spatial has no success if it is not socially constructed before (Massey 2005). In the process of exploring the new political culture that emerged with the movement of the indignants of Syntagma Square in Athens, I will address the following questions: What kind of spatial rupture was realized in Syntagma Square by the movement of indignants? What new forms of public space did this rupture create? How was the multitude transformed into a political subject? How did the multitude use space and what kind of human and spatial flows were created by its movement?

By beginning from and ending in the problematic of the spatial aspect of social protests in the contemporary urban environment, I seek to argue that the phenomenon of the indignants movement in Athens resembles phenomena described by the terms *swarm* (Thacker 2004) and *multitude* (Hardt and Negri 2004), as these are conceived in theoretical frames of reference employed in contemporary philosophy. A description of collective processes that took place in the square will be pursued, followed by an attempt to map the common actions in several different occasions during the occupation. It will be shown that the presence of the movement of the indignants in a place with such a special historical and political meaning created the possibility to transform a political protest into something much more important, namely, the reappropriation of the public space as well as

its reidentification as part of the commons through several procedures of collective action and social emancipation.

Syntagma Square: From landmark to non-lieu[2] to renegotiated public space

Syntagma Square is the biggest square of Athens and it is situated in the centre of the city. Throughout the ages, Syntagma Square has been the landmark of the city of Athens. The Square's special design conditions, rooted in its location in front of the Greek Parliament - ex Royal Palace, as well as its morphology and its historical background, set the Square as a significant urban public space - a *lieu*. Even though a historical square, as Syntagma Square is, it constitutes a part of the urban landscape when seen as space, and turns into the means of the collective memory when seen as *lieu*.

Nevertheless, Syntagma Square came to be a "corridor", which means a connecting field between the subway station and Ermou street- the most developed commercial and shopping street of Athens. The various urban reconstructions and regenerations of the Square, the gentrification that was implemented in the wider area, the continuous policing of the Parliament, the opulence of the central hotels controlling with security cameras all the area, transformed Syntagma Square into a *non-place* in Marc

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[2] According to Marc Augé, who introduces the term *non-lieu* (translated into English as *non-places* by John Howe), *non- places* refer to specific spaces (airports, stations of new networks, new commercial centres etc.), and to the relations developed between the persons\travellers with the places above. It is significant that Augé maintains that, while anthropological and historical places create a net of organic relationships around them, *non-places* reflect a conventional loneliness.

Augé's sense (1995). The Square, which for years had been the capital's "front window", became a non-place with rare social activity and involvement during the day. This form of the square bears no resemblance to the features of Raul Zibechi's "squares- courtyards".[3]

A change came in December 2008, when Syntagma Square hosted the social protests occasioned by the assassination of a 15-year-old boy by a policeman. "Greek December" was a phenomenon that confronted the city not only as a field of action and riot, but evolutionarily as the object of the litigation itself. The experience of December 2008 influenced significantly the relation with the public space; it renegotiated the meaning of the public urban environment as the physical place in which to interact without a central control.

The movement of the indignants was, for many people, the expected outcome of the "Greek December", despite their obvious differences. At the same time, the spatial transformations triggered by the multitude's actions in the Square changed the way the city, the inhabitants, the other subjectivities were perceived. The action of those transformable collectivities produced an architectural object, transformable in space-time.

Syntagma Square, which is the symbol of the central governmental power and for many years had been hosting the minimum social involvement, was now becoming the field of new socio-political interconnections in the city.

Swarm

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[3] According to Raul Zibechi, the square is the most important aspect of the urban life and the central meeting point for the residents. The square becomes the big courtyard of everyone (2010).

By conceiving the emerging collectivity of the indignants as a whole of separate persons who interact and finally create a common space, without central control, I now intend to make a theoretical shift to the concept of *swarm*, as this is presented by Eugene Thacker (2004).

On the basis of the morphological flows of the movement of the indignants of Athens illuminated by the case study, we may consider the social movement of indignants as *a swarm of units.* The concept of the swarm belongs within a particular history in approaching the philosophy and the political ontology of the social networks in the city. The ideas of *swarm intelligence*[4] and *social insects*[5] which are used in the fields of biology, entomology and ethology, as well as in those of artificial intelligence and simulations, prove with no exception that the swarm is a dynamic collectivity which is based on the correlation of multiple independent units. The case of the political swarm, however, is informed by some old ideas of social, living networks; *swarm* is not the newest term to describe social formations and collectivities. However, compared to political terms like *mass,* or *people,* or *proletariat,* or *nation*, where the individuals are not subordinated to the whole, it indicates something more by enshrining the extent to which "the self-organization requires that the group only arises from the localized, singular, heterogeneous actions of individual units" (Thacker 2004, Part Two).

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[4] Contemporary researchers use the term *swarm intelligence* in the area of the artificial intelligence, so as to indicate the dispersed and collective methods of solving problems, without central control.

[5] The term refers to insects, such as ants, bees and fireflies that create collectivities, providing social structures, without central control. Entomologist William Morton Wheeler, in his studies, referred to social insects as a "superorganism" (Wheeler, 1928).

This begs the question of whether the concept of the swarm is enough to describe the movement of the square. The response to this question is no. As Hardt and Negri suggest, the pattern of the swarm is defined by how all the members of the swarm are identical and every unit is not very creative by itself (Hardt and Negri 2004). Therefore, the swarm is opposed to the real substance of the movement of the indignants: it composes a heterogeneous multiplicity of individualities which, subsequently, does not disclaim its creativity on an individual level.

Additionally, we must admit that the spatial development of such a social movement should not be described in mere *morphological* terms. Although parallelisms to swarms or networks can give important ontological information as to the organization itself, these are not the most crucial. The fact that a social movement may, under specific circumstances, morphologically behave in terms of swarming does not necessarily create the common space produced when singularities act together. It is obvious that the technological innovation is not the main force that suggests these social changes (Hardt and Negri 2004, p.113).

That is why it is necessary to make a shift from the bio-technical terms of *swarm* and *individual*, to the political terms of *multitude* and *singularity*.

Multitude

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri contrast the concept of *multitude* with other terms used to indicate social subjects, like *people, mass* and *proletariat* (2004, p.117). Through the examination of the differences of the

concepts above, *multitude* appears to be the best term to describe the movement of the square.[6]

According to Hardt and Negri, the term *people* is traditionally a unifying concept. Despite the fact that the population consists of different persons, coming from different castes, *people* reduces all these diversities to one identity. On the contrary, the multitude consists of countless internal differences, which can never be reduced to one unity. The multitude is composed of different races, sexes, nationalities, sexual orientations, political and social opinions, and different ways of life, desires, dreams and worldview.

Masses has also a tendency to put together all the individualities under one identity. Hardt and Negri argue that the characteristic of the masses is in-difference*:* in the masses all the differences disappear. Instead, the multitude is a living and open existence which is always transforming itself. Thus, its limits are not defined, but at any time they are recognizable and identifiable.

It is true that the term *proletariat* does not include the contemporary working class as it did during 19th and 20th centuries. Nowadays, the substance of the term *proletariat* is generally based on exclusion. In its more restricted context, *proletariat* refers to the industrial labour, excluding all the other working classes. In a wider sense, the term refers to all the salaried people, excluding the unpaid household workers or the pauper people. *Multitude* is a term that both includes and widens the concept of work, as work is perceived nowadays; all the working types are considered socially

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[6] K. Douzinas also contrasts the concept of multitude to that of nation. According to his theory, the nation is a cultural and historical construction which also transforms the multiple into one unity (2011).

productive. Moreover, the production cannot be understood only in economic terms but, in wider terms, as a social production. Hardt and Negri use the term *immaterial labour*[7] so as to describe the production of communication, relations and ways of life as the "labour that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication" (Hardt and Negri 2004, p.290).

"We are nobody"

Therefore, we can admit that the multitude, which is a living social existence, is the concept that most aptly suits the movement of the indignants of Athens. Indeed, the movement displayed the special characteristics of the multitude, namely the production of subjectivity and the production of common space; These two aspects of the multitude articulated to develop the spiral and symbiotic relation described by Hardt and Negri in *Multitude*.

Who can truly be considered as the subject of this multitude? The ambiguous term *indignants* is mostly a collective identity given to a multiple subject. This collective identity did not incorporate all the heterogeneous units that constituted the multitude; rather, at times it overshadowed them. Already at the first General Assembly of Syntagma Square, the multitude answered: "we are workers, unemployed, retired, youth and we have come in Syntagma square so as to stand up for our lives

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[7] The term *immaterial labour* is mostly analysed in Hardt and Negri 's earlier book *Empire* (2000)

and our future" (Syntagma Square General Assembly resolution). [8] Similarly, at a General Assembly in Barcelona the multitude declared: "We are ordinary people. We are like you, people who get up every morning to study, to work or find a job, people who have families and friends. We are people who work hard every day to provide a better future for those around us". There were also messages like "It's all of us", "we are the 99%" or "we are nobody" written on many placards.

The symbol that best fitted this "nobody" is found in the mask of Anonymous. Guy Fawkes's happy face, with the thin moustache, is the figure that the movement of the squares needed so as to symbolize the individuality and the singularity by which it was defined. Anonymous is the symbol that embodies a common global situation; it is the indignants and protesters from all over the world, as a multitude of singularities.

The contemporary multitude denies all the old identifications of the social subjects, given mostly from the left. The indignants are unemployed and working people, having patriot, leftist or anarchist ideologies. They are young and elderly, ideological and apolitical, but all of them unified in the sentence "We are nobody".

Anonymous symbolizes the subject of the collective identity through its *anonymity*. It is an anonymity which is not a result of fear, or concealment or passive resistance, but of an active political action.

Mapping

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[8] For Syntagma Square General Assembly resolutions, see *Real Democracy* (blog), *http://realdemocracygr.wordpress.com/*

Do the singularities, as the main emerging subjectivities, actually behave in terms of multitude? How can this be verified? A description of specific *collective processes* that took place in the Square will be pursued via personal experiences and testimonies in conjunction with an attempt to map the common actions in several different occasions during the occupation and before it. I will address the following questions: How was the multitude organized, created and split? What kind of spatialities was created and what kind of new public urban space was defined? Which were the processes that indicated the singularity as the subject of the multitude? Mapping the changing spatialities of the square before the movement of indignants and during its development will yield rich assumptions as far as the substance of the square's movement is concerned.

Map 1- Everyday life (before the movement of the indignants)

On a common day before the movement of the indignants Syntagma Square was nothing more than a non-place. Observing the flow on its way from the subway station to Ermou Street, we may admit that the square plays the role of the "corridor". We can see a prescribed route followed by individuals with an obvious predetermined direction and target, start point and endpoint. Their route is effectuated without a pause or stop.

This human flow is behaving like a swarm. It is a group phenomenon that consists of heterogeneous units which are related to each other, as they move together. This relation developed between the units is important, but limited to an instinctive sequence of movements, rather than

a possible creation of a personal connection; the motivations of every unit are strictly personal. Despite the slight possibility of the existence of a mutual target for the individualities, the identification of the destination is mainly consumerism or another personalized target. Undoubtedly, without a common action or interaction, a common place cannot exist on its own.

map 1
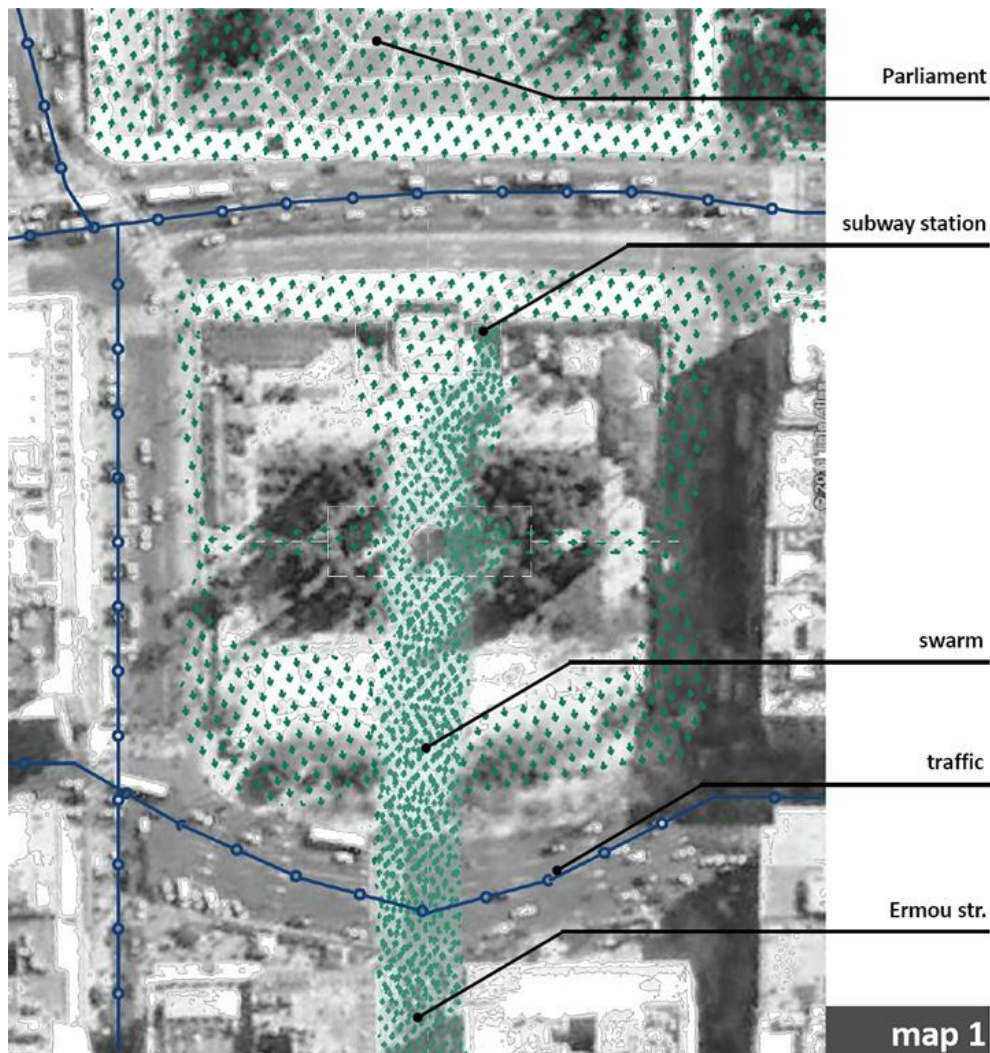
Multitude maps (during the movement of the indignants)

When the indignants of Syntagma Square are considered, they constitute a whole of different people and independent bodies, being together at the same time in the same place. From the moment the subjects start to act, to interact, to move and circulate in the space, to demand, then they are constantly converted from individuals into singularities and from mass into multitude.

How can a social multiplicity interconnect and act in common by staying internally diversified? *Multitude* is the key concept.

Map 2- The General Assembly

During the two-month occupation of the square, an Assembly was held every evening. The way in which the Assembly was organized and evolutionarily worked every night as an open-to-all discussion area offers a way of comprehending the phenomenon as defined by the characteristics attached to the terms *multitude* and *singularity*. The singularities that participate are spectators but also potentially speakers. No one or no group was allowed to dominate the rest. The randomness of speaking found in this process is the greatest evidence that all the singularities were able to interact with one another in that specific space-time, no matter how different their reasons, their political views, or desires might be. This interaction could be expressed through the singularities' condescension or their indifference,

cheering, applauses, disapproval or even a singular or a massive withdrawal. In other words, the assembly, by its nature, contradicts representation and opposes any kind of political or other identification.

Consequently, the process of the assembly reveals a new field in the space-time that is produced day by day by the change and differentiation of the singularities and by their spatial development. Contrary to the swarm, the multitude is continuously "designing" itself; it creates spatialities with high densities (mainly around the centres) and it does not move instinctively, apart from the times it does so in defence. The multitude is not a static formation, but an entity in motion.

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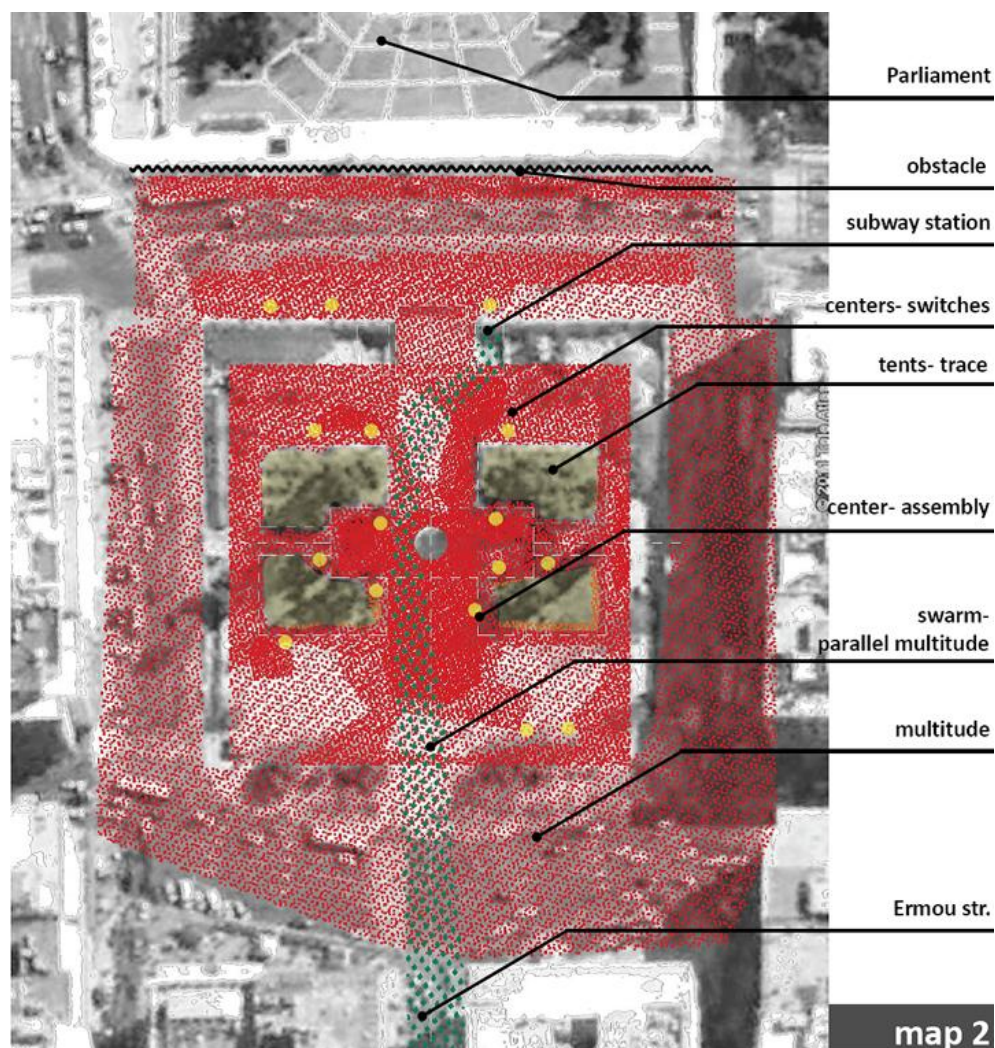
The "main" and the "upper" square

At the same time, another part of the multitude developed in the upper level of the square.

The "upper square", as it was called, was mostly constituted of individuals wrapped in a Greek flag. Although the character of the "upper square" was not purely nationalistic or apolitical, we may note that most negotiations were undertaken in much more conventional political terms, demanding the overthrow or even replacement of the government. In the "main" square, the actions were much more radical: not only the Assembly, but all the initiatives of the singularities revealed that the multitude did not just seek the overthrow of the current government scheme, but also proposed a different way of life's perceiving and understanding of itself. It is important to note that if in the age of bio-politics politics undoubtedly start when the individual chooses to oppose itself towards the sovereign behaviour, the concept of coexistence in the age of bio-politics tends to encapsulate all the different expressions of the multitude in the square: not only the ones of the "main" square, but those of the "upper square" too. Furthermore, the socio-political approximations that discriminate the crowd into an intellectual elite and uncivilized mass were mostly based on attendance in the Assembly. The spontaneous "upper square" and the conscious "main square" was a bipolar distinction that penetrated the whole multitude's existence.

Timothy Mitchell claims that the distinction between the spontaneous, connected with the soul or the body, and the conscious, linked

to logic or the mind, is a consequence of bio-political power in its modern form (1990). Therefore, every attempt to discriminate the crowd is just reproducing the political forms of bio-political power, according to which the body and the mind should stay separated so as to be better cultivated. Even though the value of the Assembly has already been proven historically, there are new terms of politicization and collective action that should be used.

The centres as switches

In Syntagma Square the multitude created nineteen workgroups, which functioned for two months: a children's playground, a homeless campaign meeting point, a multimedia group, a first aid centre, an international solidarity group, an artists' group stand, a "composure" group, a "time-bank" place, and so on. These groups were distributed in the square and became spatial nodes that influenced the possible stop or flow of the singularities. For each of these groups there was what the multitude referred to as a "reference point centre". It is significant that these centres, which might be stable, or transformable in the space-time, ephemeral or even immaterial, did not suggest a univocal relation with the multitude, but a bidirectional and interactive contact, where transmitter and receiver were constantly changing roles. These localized interactions produced smaller or bigger common spaces, which combined to produce the common space of the multitude of the Square. The most important characteristic of these centres was a spiral-symbiotic relation analogous to that which Hardt and

Negri describe in *Multitude* (2007). It is a relation that develops between the emerging subjectivities of the multitude, the centres and the emerging common spaces.

Drawing on Guillermo Kaejane, I will suggest that these centres function as "switches" that receive and dispatch motions and meanings (2011). The substance is the production of the commons as a result of the multitude's creativity. For Kaejane, "In the square, like in every distributed network, there was a number of different centres, among which no one was "in the centre" (2011). The produced common space is every time a different spatial-architectural object.

The "parallel" multitude

It is remarkable that during the two months that witnessed the multitude's development in Syntagma Square there was also a number of individuals that used the space as it is presented in Map 1 (everyday life in the square before the movement of the indignants). The map shows consumers whose destination is the commercial centre, tourists whose destinations are the hotels or the sights of Athens, employees and workers whose destination is their offices, and even hurrying passers-by, all behaving in terms of swarming. It is a "parallel multitude" which crosses the Square without getting involved with the multitude.

Map 3- The trace of the multitude

In the case of the indignants of Athens, the multitude did not cross the Square. It occupied it. It inhabited it.

The tents that were set in the grass lawn were the strongest proof that the Square was inhabited. Even the way that these tents were organized and distributed on site indicates the singularities as the subjects of the multitude. By self-organizing and refusing to establish a central control, they created a spatiality with strongly distinctive features. The installation of the tents on the one hand renegotiated the predefined, default and institutionalized use of the equipment of the Square, on the other it broke the entrenched concepts of what the private and public space consists.

Although the Square was still accommodating the rhythms of everyday life with the consumerist swarms (parallel multitudes) still moving towards their strictly personal targets, with the presence of the indignants something had changed. The traces left by the multitude meant that even when the singularities were not physically present, they would soon return so as to recompose the multitude in a new form. The multitude was present, even if it was invisible.
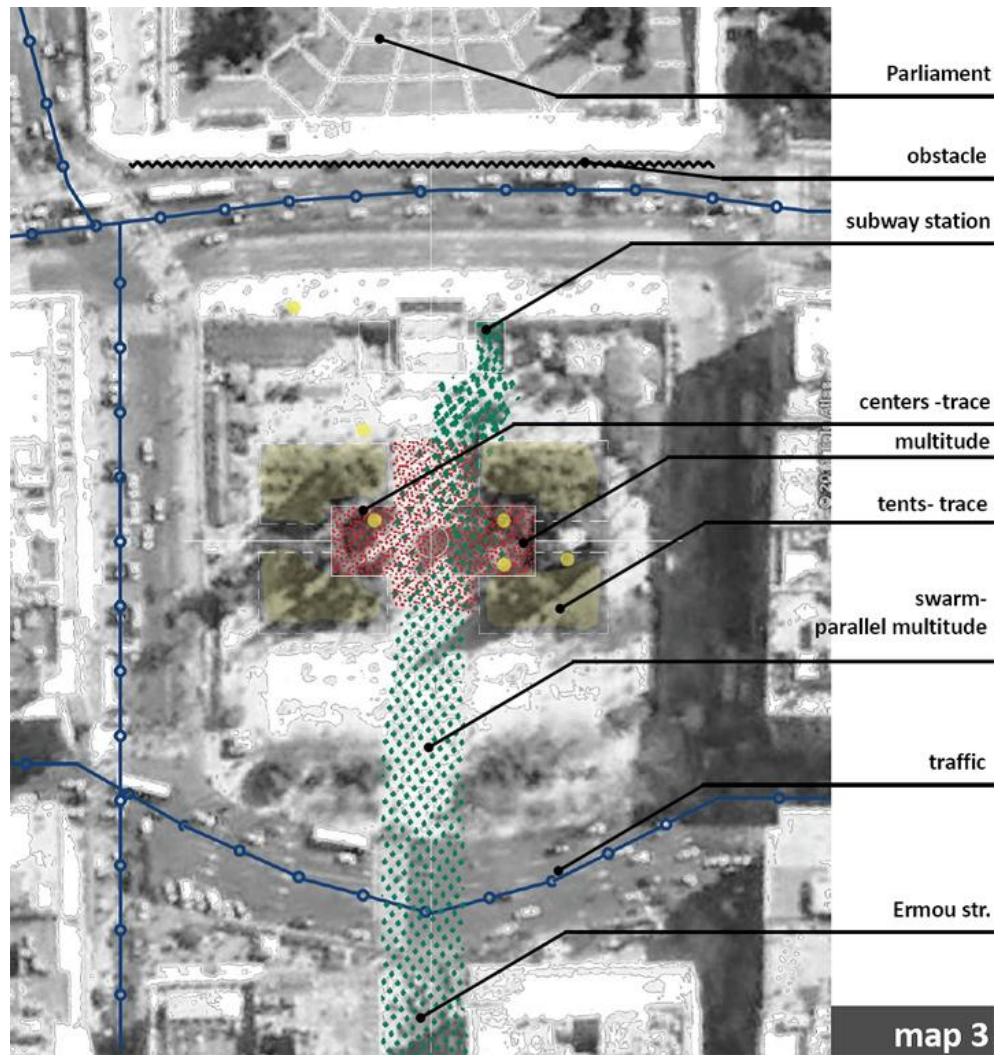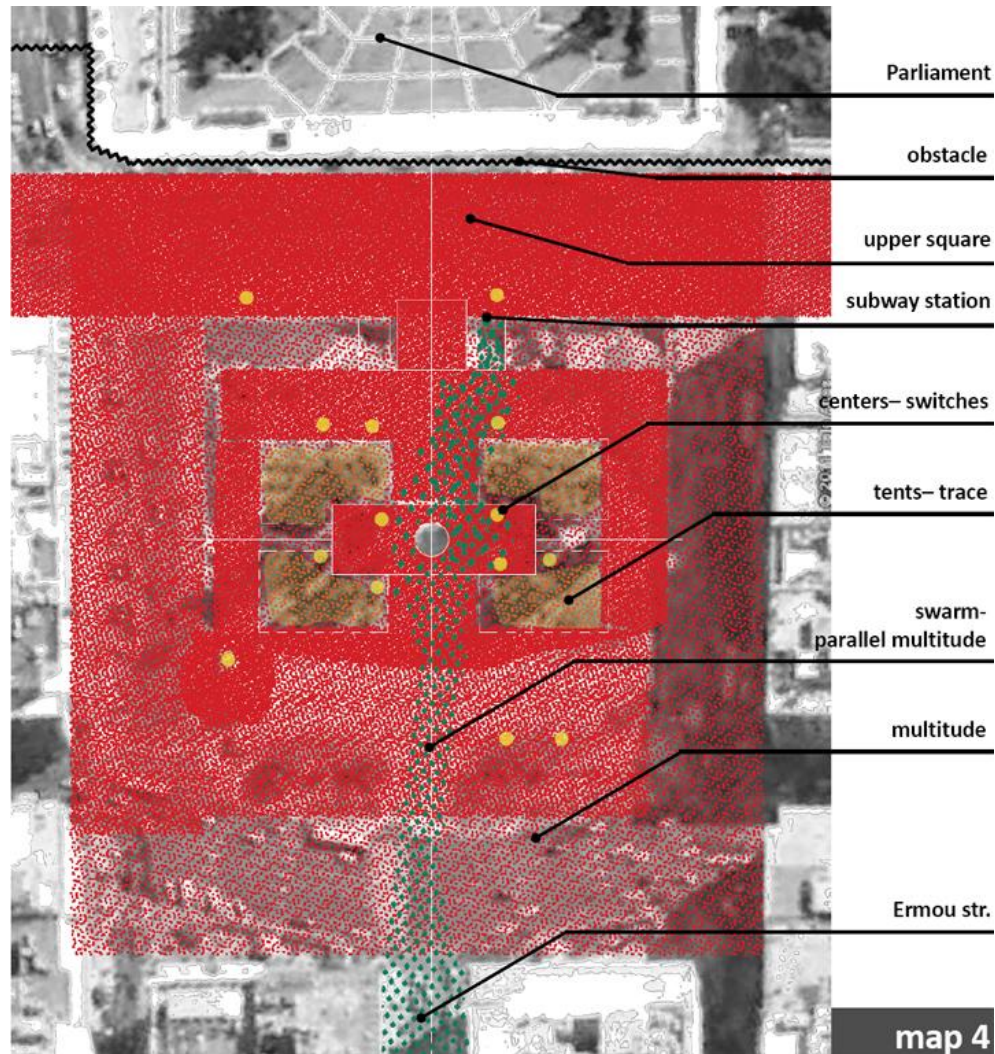
Map 4 – The "hyper-multitude"

The multitude was perceived not only through its traces, but also through the cyber network. The internet site www.real-democracy.org was the place where people communicated and exchanged information and experiences. Even the Facebook page of the indignants in Athens, seemed to merge some impermanently detached individualities. As these "immaterial quasi-collectivities" (Stavrides 2011) proceeded from the cyber interconnectivity to the practical coexistence in the square, they were

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transformed from lonely individuals to singularities of a multitude that was collectively composed there and then.

Every Sunday the continental protests were organized, mainly based on this cyber communication. What was special about the cyber network was the huge multitude that was created through the intelligible interconnection of Syntagma square with the corresponding one of Plaza del Sol in Madrid; it was a hyper- multitude that united locally detached but digitally interconnected singularities using an invisible way of connectivity. Significantly, the movement of the squares which encompassed squares all over the world was united in one body. It has been and it will be the movement of the squares which succeed in being "one" through an invisible virtual network of solidarity.

Within this framework, squares not only in the Mediterranean, but the world over, converse with each other using new words; by posting placards and sending messages of solidarity, the new collectivities create networks, change correlations and discover new ways of interconnection. They all stand up for a better life and a social emancipation, despite the obvious differentiating characteristics. The uprisings, the ideas, the sparks and the emotions pass through the internet highways and the diversifications of the squares disappear. From Tahrir Square, Plaza del Sol and Syntagma Square, to the metropolitan centre of London and in the shadow of Wall Street, the global multitude use the urban space as a threshold to communicate. Their interaction is already a fact. The Internet becomes the new global space through which the locally detached and lonely individuals have the opportunity to become the singularities of an existing multitude.

Internet offers a new field in which new collectivities are germinated and new common references are created.

Map 4 labels: Parliament, obstacle, upper square, subway station, centers– switches, tents– trace, swarm– parallel multitude, multitude, Ermou str., map 4

Map 5- The crackdown

During the crackdown of the multitude by the police, the singularities were moving in swarms though instinctive changes of direction, massive split or even breakthrough. Nonetheless, there were also

some singularities still in the main square, trying to attract the rest of the crowd, by setting improvised dance. The greatest proof of the singularities' presence was revealed by making human chains in order to rinse the square of the tear-gas of the violent crackdown. The rinse of the square was definitely another practice whereby the singularities of the multitude produced common references and finally a common space through individualistic actions and self-organized initiatives.
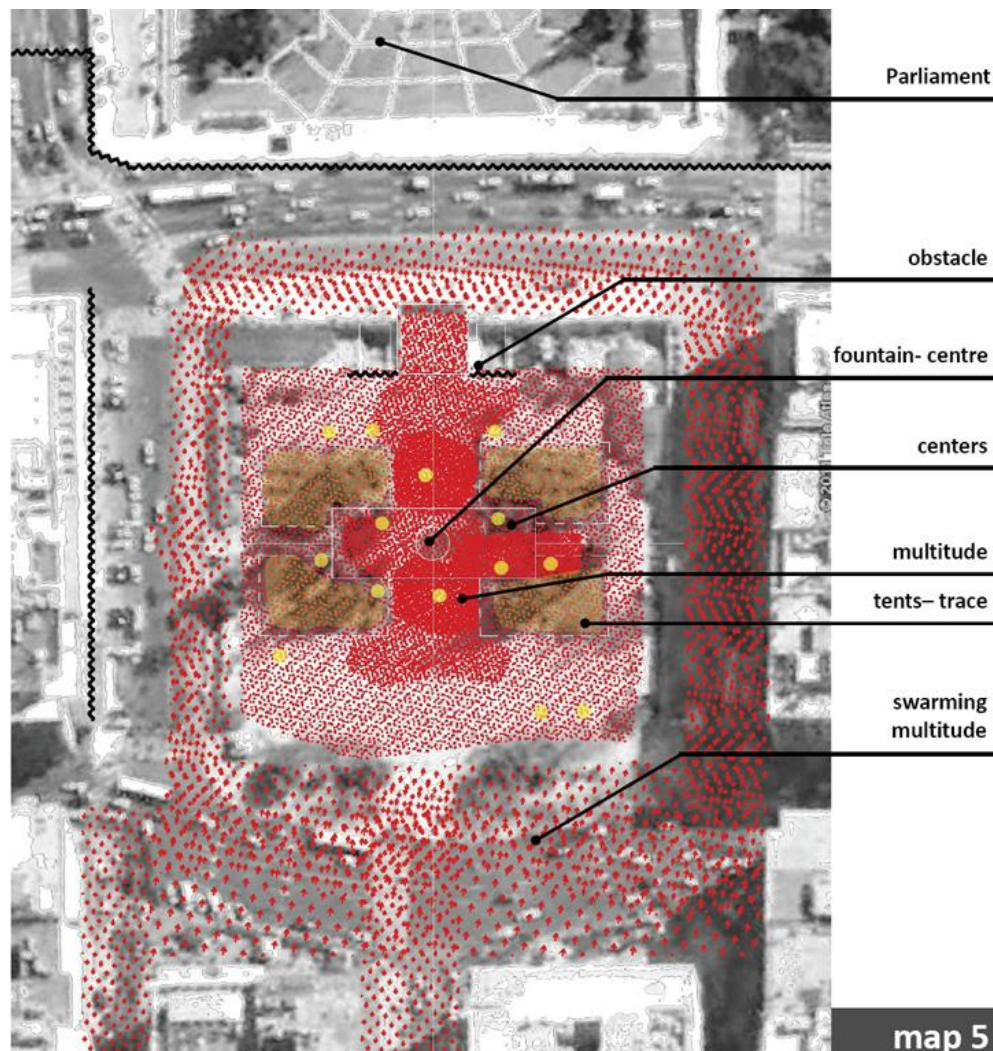
The common space of the movement of the squares

In conclusion, Syntagma Square has turned from a non-place and a field of hurry and distracted routes, into our home, as it hosts not only our indignation, but also our thoughts, emotions and dreams. The Square has been converted into a reference point of our sensibilities. The movement of the Square has created a continuous transformation of established ways of collective life and action. It has reoccupied time and the urban space and it has restructured them. The hierarchies have been overthrown and new common forms of life have become observable. The most important aspect of this research is the ways in which it illuminates the broadening possibilities of thinking, perceiving, reading and designing space, through different translations of the same things, through a different vocabulary.

By considering a multitude in motion, we can perceive space as reception field of unexpected and impermanent centres that create surprising and transformative behaviours in space-time. These centres may function as the infrastructure of an urban square, while, at the same time permit infinite readings of each singularity. At this point we may refer to the "generic procedure" (Badiou 2007) of designing and perceiving the architectural object. According to Alain Badiou, the meaning which is given to an object there and then is an open process and signifies a production of a *genus of truth*. The form, the name, the *genus* of the object follows the meaning which is given to it by each user. It is clear that this procedure can never be predefined, nor remain the same. Thus, the users, namely the urban inhabitants as subjects transformable in space-time, are required to

understand and interpret space through multiple readings, recognitions and identifications and finally give their own truth on a multiform, polysemous and polyonymous architectural object.

This is exactly what the singularities of Syntagma Square did; they expressed those different ways of thinking, perceiving, creating and inhabiting public space by establishing a relational field of conflict, coexistence, contestation and multiplicity of facts and incidents. The indignants of Syntagma Square brought a rupture in two axes and two sets of concepts. On one axis, they changed the established idea of the confirmed *user*, by setting the singularity at the role of the subject who is using the urban space. On the other axis, they altered the *use* and the function of the most central square of Athens, in a subversive manner. The rupture of the incumbent and predefined actions and activities in the square by the singularities was definitely a political and social act. The benches became the holders of the exhibits of the artists, the grass lawn was full of sleeping bags and tents, the trees supported the loudspeakers and the placards, the central fountain became the source to rinse the square from the tear-gas and the paved area became a great seat for all.

Therefore, the common space created was the result of the interconnectivity and interaction of a society in motion. Moving societies are exploring the public space, discovering its virtues, deleting its exclusions, resetting its freedom, reconsidering its meanings and finally creating the common. The multitude in the Square signified a loud comeback of the politics as a collective action; Syntagma Square was no longer a field only for private interests and investments but also the natural

urban space. Common space, according to Marcel Henaff and Tracy B. Strong, "admits no criteria; it is open to all in the same way. It is not owned or controlled. […] Everybody can go there and extract from it what is there" (2001, p.4).

So did the indignants globally.The movement of the indignants of Syntagma Square may seem to have vanished, but the ideas that this movement brought together still exist. They are alive in every single person's soul and mind. Syntagma Square is situated opposite the Greek Parliament and in the centre of many governmental buildings and Ministries. Thus, the occupation of Syntagma Square was a definite act of contestation of the whole political and social life. However, the simultaneous occupations of Plaza del Sol, Liberty Plaza and the protests in London, Cairo, and Tunis give us the opportunity to admit that it was not just one more protest against the Greek government. In the squares of the world, a new chapter of the global history is rising. It is the global aspect of the squares of today.

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