To Tell a Story

This text was written over the past few months by several pairs of hands. Each time it seemed almost finished, the process was disrupted by new series of events that forcefully revealed its incompleteness. We often disagreed on practically everything – not just on what had actually occurred and when, or how many people had been wherever, but also on the underlying issues traversing the period which this text seeks to relate. The discourse it presents is incomplete, partial, debatable and possibly dubious. Given the innumerable personal and collective experiences, we can do little more, in so few pages, than compile the notes, ideas, desires and outlooks of a handful of people, which are of course limited by their respective personal and political backgrounds. Perhaps more than ever before, the increasingly intense emancipatory processes under way have fostered a tremendous multiplication of instances during which everything is commented and discussed to exhaustion. We hope that our contribution will prove useful in that debate and enrich that space of dialogue, which is at times neither pacific nor simple. Such is the spirit in which we intend to circulate this text.

In what follows we have sought to briefly outline a narrative of the movement. Paradoxically, it begins with a limitation imposed by the word “movement”, a highly connotative designation encompassing vastly disparate figures, from Via do Infante users\(^2\) to Catholic pro-life activists. That is why we decided to explore the minefield of activist and militant references, extracting the meaning of greatest interest to us: something in perpetual motion that contains the possibility for an emancipatory collective becoming. Let us then start by specifying what the movement is not. It is not a political party's inter- and meta-electoral strategy, i.e. an attempt to create protest discourses that later translate into a redistribution of forces in parliament or other loci of representation. Nor is it a compendium of political, social or creative activities in an effort to make up for the inadequacies of political power, or to create a hybrid with it, in a strategy aimed at revitalizing “democracy”, civil society or pro-development elites. Nor is it all of the allegedly radical organizations, institutions or individualities, each isolated in its own market niche and autistic self-reference, comfortably inhabiting worlds created solely for its own consumption. It is not the defense of a threatened

\(^1\)“Sur le passage de quelques personnes à travers une assez courte unité de temps,” film by Guy Debord, translated by Ken Knabb, Bureau of Public Secrets

\(^2\)The Committee of Via do Infante users (Comissão de Utentes da Via do Infante) fought against the tolls imposed on Via do Infante (a highway in Algarve) by the PSD/CDS government in the framework of the austerity measures.
normality, it is not citizen participation, it is not an “activist itch” and even less, a \textit{parlamento dos pequeninos}.^{3}

What we have called the \textit{movement} is nothing more than the set of relationships bearing a desire for autonomy and the conditions for materializing that desire. It is an affinity – sometimes strategic, sometimes emotional – which takes physical form not only in the streets but also in the spaces seized from power. It transcends identities and affiliations, passing through vectors and fluxes rather than through forms and states. Simply speaking, the movement is more a succession of affinities and sharing than the individual or organizational labels of those who traverse it.

To tell a story, a specific point in time has to be set for the beginning, end, or center of gravity. Furthermore, a plateau – the land through which time passes and people move – has to be defined. To tell this history, which strangely resembles the history of class struggle, the history of mankind, it is a daunting task to set such a point in time. Where do we begin?

If we exclude at the outset the French Revolution and the Paris Commune, the storming of the Winter Palace and the Kronstadt uprising, the Spanish Civil War and May 68, the PREC\(^4\) and \textit{cavaquismo}\(^5\), it is our time, fierce and implacable, that demands our attention. There is no shortage of loose ends to pick up – problems and questions, controversies and debates, choices and divergences – all of which are, in the final analysis, the very material making up our lives, which has finally arrived light-footed to contaminate Politics with a capital P, remove it from our TV screens and thrust it into our cities’ streets and squares. Things unthinkable just a few years ago are now commonplace, certain ideas have spread, certain possibilities widened up, certain positions were radicalized, and everything became more complicated. That is why we felt it was important to write this text, which is no more or less radical than the current times. Where, then, should we begin? On November 24, 2010, there was a general strike called by the CGTP (General Confederation of Portuguese Workers) and the UGT (General Union of Workers), involving roughly 3 million workers. Four days earlier, NATO had held its world summit in Lisbon. This will be the starting point for our story.

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\(^{3}\) “Parliament for Children,” an annual initiative in which local elementary and high school students spend a day taking part in a session of the Portuguese parliament.

\(^{4}\) The \textit{Processo Revolucionário Em Curso} or “Ongoing Revolutionary Process” emerged just after the Carnation Revolution of April 25, 1974 and continued through to the approval of the Portuguese constitution in April 1976. This period, which reached its zenith in the Hot Summer of 1975, witnessed the radical transformation of Portuguese society, from agrarian reform and widespread nationalizations of banks and other key economic companies to the wave of autonomous working class and farm workers’ struggles, occupation of land, factories and houses, and the rise of neighborhood and workplace councils.

\(^{5}\) Reference to Aníbal Cavaco Silva, Prime Minister from 1985 to 1995, a ten-year “reign” during which he symbolized economic liberalism and introduced private-sector domination in the economy. He is currently President of the Portuguese Republic.
November 20 and 24, 2010

NATO held its world summit and a general strike was called, all in the same week. The masters of the world came to discuss global security, and for their own security, a state of emergency was declared in Lisbon. Democracy was suspended for a few days, as the meeting of the military-industrial complex provided the pretext for preventing people from crossing the border on grounds that they were wearing black clothing, for throwing protestors into jail because they glued posters on walls saying “Peace Yes, NATO No,” for generalized paranoia, and for kettling a few hundred protestors on Liberdade Avenue for a whole afternoon, during which they were completely surrounded by riot police and couldn’t leave even to take a shit.

It also provided an opportunity for one of those long and stimulating exchanges of communiqués and accusations between the satellite organizations of the PCP\(^6\) and the rest of the world, on the fresh-as-ever theme of who has an “objective” interest in destroying the unity and such like. One of that party’s leaders, surrounded by an intimidating group of protest marshals, was seen pointing out to the police the protestors who had not been invited to the great festival of peace. The main conclusion that could be drawn from all this was that not everyone was prepared to make the street a space open to differing positions united by a desire to challenge the present state of things. An already existing gap widened and deepened to the point of complete incommunicability.

Luckily, “the ant on her path was heading in the opposite direction”\(^7\), and just four days later, a demonstration called by a few nebulous entities – the "invisibles," "raw material" and "queer-feminists" – around the slogan “Anti-capitalist demonstration for blockades and sabotage” brought out more than a thousand people between Camões and Rossio squares, gathering all those who wanted to spend that day of struggle in the streets and not home. The demonstration doubled in size, spontaneously and without much effort, when a crowd assembled in response to a call by various satellite organizations of the Bloco de Esquerda\(^8\) (BE) joined the demonstration en masse, something which for years had been deemed unthinkable. And – the icing on the cake – the demonstration had been called out by dangerous subversives, as the newspapers, radio and TV repeated over and over again, flowers not fit to be smelled. Late that afternoon, true to the healthy motto that “the strike does not end here,” a communiqué announced the occupation of an abandoned building on São Lázaro street, where soup was served to all interested. The occupation lasted only about 24 hours but already pointed towards a path full of good things. However nutritious and tasty, the soup was still a little too watery.

Until this wave of turbulence crossed our lives, the institutional left was the maximum horizon of politics for the vast majority of people who took to the streets to protest. The lingua franca spoken by

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\(^6\) Partido Communista Portuguese, Portuguese Communist Party.

\(^7\) Reference to a song by Zeca Afonso, “A formiga no carrinho ia em sentido contrário”.

\(^8\) The Bloco de Esquerda or Left Bloc is a party composed of a coalition of leftwing groups.
a large part of the social movements concerned rights and demands, the first of which was the right to be better governed. The corollary of this state of things was that all struggles, whether on the level of discourse or of organizational models, were channeled towards the maximum objective of creating a “left-wing alternative,” “democratic modernization” or whatever other dull variant of capitalism with a human face. The movements had spokespersons who represented them and appeared on TV, explaining to the masses of spectators what the masses of demonstrators desired, in a credible, articulate, and even pedagogical way, so that “the Portuguese” could understand that they were just a vote away from perpetual happiness. Naturally, conflictual, disobedient or defiant attitudes inconveniently disturbed that pacified image of the streets, and anyone who assumed such attitudes was accused of the most shameful acts imaginable: vandalism, provocation, violence or, the very worst of accusations, “people who think they’re in Greece.”

Although none of this had disappeared, the hegemony underpinning this apparent inevitability was fractured. November 2010 demonstrated that the space and conditions existed to contend for the street, not in a numerical and arithmetic sense, but rather politically, as expressed in such simple or complex things as slogans, texts calling for demonstrations, or banners on which they can be read. There, the term “anti-capitalist” began to assume substantive meaning, as opposed to the mere content of pamphlets, and opened up space for another word, “anti-authoritarian,” which is generally not far whenever things start getting interesting. From then on, horizontal decision-making and informality as an organizing principle constituted the natural way of doing things, and control suddenly and unexpectedly became more complicated. Needless to say, the healthy habit of taking to the streets without prior warning or communication with the authorities became commonplace, without anyone being offended. As was stated at the time, and written in capital letters for the inattentive, “THE STRIKE DOES NOT END HERE.” And the fact of the matter was that it did not end there. The soup thickened and became even tastier.

March 12, 2011

A Facebook event was the starting point for the protest movement, which drew over two hundred thousand people to Liberdade Avenue in Lisbon and more than sixty thousand in Oporto, as well as many other Portuguese cities and world capitals. To say that this was making a mountain out of a molehill does not say enough about the demonstration, which was, paradoxically, a gigantic and powerful collective demonstration of impotence: it was important, not in and of itself, but rather despite itself. Marked by impoverished political discourse and as much conviction as a gameshow on daytime TV, the multitude that swept through Lisbon accomplished nothing and affirmed little. True, we were ultimately enthused by its outlook, and no one was indifferent to the sight of the avenue
overflowing from one sidewalk to the other. However, perhaps because that moment contrasted with the immense mediocrity of all the rest, we were left with a bitter taste in our mouths.

Thereafter, the demonstration’s organizers produced nothing but a pathetic vanguardist project known as M12M\(^9\), which tried by every means in its power to take control of the movement, until it lost all credibility and disappeared, no one knows exactly where. As for its discourse, the problem arose immediately from the formulation of an emancipatory project of “making a politician out of each citizen.” In other words, the “citizen” was explored as political subject, as if the social contract that gave birth to this figure were not in ruins, the still smoking remains of a building burnt to the ground. We’re sorry, but of all the identities we were told we had, from gender to nation, the first to throw out will always be that of the citizen. The idea that a valid and worthy political process is underway, balancing forces and wills, in which we, as participants, have rights and duties that oblige us to keep it moving and heading in the right direction, is no longer just a joke in poor taste but a serious insult. Promoting citizenship as a collective emancipatory identity or as a set of instruments by which we can act in the social and political spheres poses two main problems. First, it erects a barrier between those who are entitled to citizenship and those who are not, between those with access to processes of formal and informal socialization and those lacking that access. It is thus that more and more categories of people are denied the right to enter the city: illegal immigrants and prostitutes, stevedores and ghetto youths murdered by police firing ten centimeters from their heads, etc.

The second problem involves the relationship between the players in that pale imitation of a conflict: on the one hand, those who seek ongoing, effective and respectable use of the instruments of democratic intervention (activists, petitioners, militants) and on the other, legitimated by the former, those who set up and manage those same instruments, using them to cover up for and justify every type of crime, abuse and theft (the government and other economic and political decision-makers). This led to a situation in which the former sought to render the street intelligible in the eyes of power, translating the protest struggle into language acceptable to the institutions.

Likewise, the project of making a politician out of each citizen is diametrically opposed to a reality premised on politics as everyone’s concern, so that, as such, it reinforces the artificial fragmentation that regulates life in contemporary society. This means validating and multiplying the instruments of representation in a palace intrigue which, by its own nature, excludes the very people it is supposed to integrate. This also means widening the gap between daily life and the bodies that organize it, necessarily reducing any possibility of action to the distribution of pamphlets promoting ideas about parliamentary social change, about electing or, worse still, getting elected to “represent” alienated wills. The day that politics is subsumed in citizenship, our desires will be nothing more than words on a piece of paper.

\(^9\) Movimento de 12 Março, - 12\(^{th}\) March Movement.
Rossio

The occupation of Rossio square in Lisbon began in late May 2011, significantly influenced by the squares occupation movement in Spain, which started on May 15. That was the time of Democracia Real Ya! and of the Indignados movements which spread to many other countries, particularly in Europe. Contrary to the scenes broadcast to various cities around the world, the occupation of Rossio square did not succeed in creating the necessary autonomous city – that multiplicity of points of convergence, the occupation of space at once decentralized and organic, a presence in total contradiction with the normal organization of the country and of everyday life. The encampments elsewhere, while representing something new, were built on top of what already existed: in Barcelona and Madrid, on a strong social movement which at the time of the occupation had a very clear idea of what it needed to do from a practical point of view (erect infrastructure, multiply spaces, become self-sufficient); in the United States, on other forms of political sociability, from “civil society” organizations to informal collectives, which found room to develop in the absence of a “large-scale” institutional Left and remained invisible despite their numbers. In contrast, in Portugal, where the Left is still defined mainly by what it says, by the discourse it formulates and by the public contestation in which it plays a part, the occupation of Rossio square logically assumed the same theatrical form: on one side, controversy on the stage; on the other, an audience showing mixed enthusiasm for the speeches. The main problem in Rossio square was that all energy was focused on maintaining a popular assembly, alternating between naïve hyper-activist voluntarism and inflamed speeches rehearsed in front of a mirror, and that was in fact the least interesting thing happening at the time.

Another problems that arose during the encampment was the attempt by a handful of people to impose a sense of urgency. While fitting the pace of institutional politics and facilitating vanguard or party control, urgency conflicts with the necessary maturation process of the diverse sensibilities present there. Urgency is well suited to the confines of an agenda, but not to the present and future under construction there. When not dictated by the terms of a conflict, urgency serves no other purpose than to destroy all of the most liberating and contagious aspects of a common experience of construction and living together.

Despite all this, the outcome vastly exceeded expectations. Anyone passing by on the first day, even early in the morning, and expecting to find just a few tents, was surprised to see dozens of people discussing and realized that something was changing. Indeed, what was perhaps most interesting – and in the end saved Rossio from itself – was the fact that all of this little activist-political-revolutionary world was caught by surprise. No one in those social movements, whose composition ranged from party bureaucrats to anti-authoritarian informalities, really understood what was going on. The former proved incapable of controlling and channeling the discussion, despite repeated attempts, whereas the latter only expressed perplexity and astonishment at seeing their privileged role as the paladins of saintly revolutionary purity so totally challenged.
The rising discontent and the proto-antagonistic crowds that converged in ever-large numbers on the demonstrations and the encampment made the map more legible by bringing to light affinities and differences. From one moment to the next, a festival that for so many years was attended on invitation only now drew huge lines, crowds of people eagerly waiting to join the dance or just take a look out of curiosity. That is precisely the point from where we should depart. In moments of regime crisis, common sense, like the truths that normalize life in society, tends to undergo rapid change. Only by welcoming the surprise of newly radicalized sensibilities can we avoid feeling jealous, resentful and out of phase with the revolt. The longevity and persistence of a dissident path form a field of forces, not a moral position. Furthermore, we know that after a week at the barricades, all of us share the same qualities, putting us on the same level. That's the way time passes, expanding and contracting as determined by velocity.

Even though we are neither for nor against consensus and reject not only "civic" identity but also inflamed leftist discourse straight out of Parque Mayer10, if we move beyond the shiver of hearing the first stanzas of the songs in Rossio square and remembering the Dead Kennedys' warning about politically correct hippie fascism (referring to the "unkempt" appearance of the encampment), it is worth stressing that few political moments experienced in Lisbon in recent years have been as interesting and striking. Indeed, although we were not necessarily satisfied with the discourse produced in the assemblies, we found the very fact that they existed immensely satisfying, and even more satisfying was the whole associated infrastructure that made them possible. It was truly exciting to go to Rossio square at two in the morning and observe hundreds of people in frank discussion about their lives while sidestepping ideologico-party pitfalls wherever possible – a sight that was inconceivable to everyone only a few months earlier.

October 15, 2011

A global call was launched to hold demonstrations on October 15th all over the world, with the aim of spreading and building on the experiences of the Arab spring, the Spanish indignados, the Greek movement, the Icelandic revolution, the Occupy movement in the U.S. and the March 12th movement in Portugal. The date was chosen to coincide with the five-month anniversary of the first protest in Spain. In Lisbon, the call led to the first mass demonstration built on the affinities forged in Rossio square, organized by an array of groups and collectives known as Plataforma 15 de Outubro (15O). When the day came, tens of thousands marched from Marquês de Pombal circle to São Bento11, for a record turnout not to be topped until September 15th, 2012. As the demo neared the end but before it reached the stairs leading up to São Bento, controlled by the police, the scenario

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10 The reference to Parque Mayer, a neglected old park in the center of Lisbon which still houses several theaters, is used here to ridicule the outmoded theatricality of the discourse.
11 Sao Bento, a former palace, is the seat of the Portuguese Parliament or Assembleia da República.
unraveled. The front and rear lines – which generally frame a march – fell apart completely and in its stead a huge cauldron formed, all of its ingredients spewing out randomly.

Several people began throwing eggs, and at the same time someone climbed onto the sound truck, grabbed the mike and chanted “invasion, invasion” in a loop, all the while resisting the “demonstration’s owners.” The latter then switched off the mike and turned up the music to drown out his harangue. Soon the square was bursting at the seams, and a group of undercover officers infiltrated the demonstration to steal the protestors’ eggs, but came up against a solidarity that would continue to characterize all of the street actions to come. In the ensuing confusion, a few undercover officers tugged at a demonstrator’s feet to try and remove him from his precarious perch atop one of the lion statues on the stairs, which were effectively occupied. Meanwhile, as hundreds climbed the stairs, the “organizers” shouted over the mike “Sit down! Sit down!” Almost everyone ignored the order, openly disobeying both police authority and the movement’s pseudo-leadership.

Confronted with such scorn and hostility, the movement’s self-appointed leaders, who were standing behind overturned police barriers at the bottom of the stairs – looking as though they’d been jostled by a mitra\(^\text{12}\) and dropped their ice-cream cone – decided to save face by applauding and celebrating the invasion. The crowd’s spirit then calmed down and a popular assembly got under way. That night, a police charge evacuated the last occupants from the stairs, some of whom were arrested. Over the following days, the Plataforma created for the event almost disintegrated due to internal discussions over what happened that day.

If this narrative is to serve a useful purpose, the first is to give an account of what has changed. We are speaking of a time that has ceased to exist, a time when nothing could be done without discussing with a battalion of parliamentary assistants, party officials and professional trade-unionists. They have been trying to regain lost ground ever since. It’s not hard to recognize them – always reminding us that they are the ones giving the orders, whether from a mike on a sound truck or from an area protected by protest marshals.

\[\text{November 24, 2011}\]

Exactly a year after the first, the CGTP called another general strike, announcing for the first time the organization of a demonstration. The brief contacts between Plataforma 15O and the trade union federation having proved fruitless, the Plataforma called a second demonstration, along the same route but at a different time. Soon after leaving Rossio square, the demonstration split in two: the more “respectable” front section of the march quickened its step to catch up with the CGTP, while the

\(^{12}\text{Mitra is Portuguese slang for youths from proletarian and popular backgrounds and neighborhoods who supposedly wear hip-hop style clothing and commit petty crimes. The Portuguese equivalent to the term 'chav', usually employed in the UK.}\)
tail end slowed down to engage in such actions as overrunning shops in the Chiado\textsuperscript{13} and hanging a banner from a balcony. When the CGTP demo reached São Bento and realized they were outnumbered by \textit{Plataforma 150} protestors, they quickly packed their bags and left. Renewed attempts to occupy the stairs culminated in violent police charges and arbitrary arrests by undercover officers. By then, bringing down the police barriers in front of the stairs to the parliament had become an ordinary and almost ritual act.

The end result for the PSP\textsuperscript{14} was a public relations scandal. Footage of officers brutally beating up a protester inundated the social media and newspapers, and two cops were identified who had infiltrated the demonstration to pull down the police barriers in front of the parliament. The confrontation with police repression generated two types of reactions: 1) a desperate attempt to convince the police that they too were workers; 2) an uncontrollable paranoia causing any unusual looking protestor to be taken for a potential fascist or undercover cop. In short, some demonstrators sought to separate out good and bad cops whereas others assumed a policing function, but neither reaction made the slightest relevant contribution to an analysis of the security forces' role. The same sectors that had been discredited during the October 15th demonstration now singularized themselves on a strategic level, in order to regain lost ground, through that process of seeing in every act of disobedience a potential police provocation.

\textbf{January 21, 2012}

The fighting spirit first consolidated on Rossio square and at its peak in the days of October then entered a period of decline. A call by \textit{Plataforma 150} for a “March of Indignation” brought out less than two thousand demonstrators. Nevertheless, the response triggered by the far right's showy, organized intrusion at the rear of the demonstration was spontaneous and collective. The demonstrators decided to defend themselves with violence and attack using what they had at hand – first, the \textit{cancioneiro de abril}\textsuperscript{15}, and then arms and legs, bottles and rocks. Within minutes after a Nazi lit a flare in a demonstrator's face, the fascist scum was encircled and evicted. Their banners were torn from their hands and their flags burnt. When the police arrived, it did no more than keep the two groups of demonstrators apart. In action there, effectively and decisively, was genuine leftwing unity built at the grassroots by women, old and young people, blacks and whites, united in their determination not to leave a single street to the fascists. It was a final parting of the waters – from then on, no far-right presence in demonstrations would be tolerated.

\textbf{March 22, 2012}

\textsuperscript{13} Famous shopping district full of boutiques and cafés, located west of Rossio square and the low-lying downtown area.
\textsuperscript{14} Public Security Police.
\textsuperscript{15} Songbook commemorating the Carnation Revolution.
Just a few months later, yet another general strike was called. Meanwhile, the tension in the atmosphere had grown, due in part to the deteriorating social and political situation, as well as to the fear of renewed clashes between police and protestors. Plataforma 15O called another demonstration along the same route as before, and the CGTP discreetly convoked a march, to take place a few hours earlier. At the same time, an anonymous call went out for yet another demonstration at 1 p.m. on Saldanha square in Lisbon, around the rallying cries “occupy the streets” and “block everything.” The turnout was not huge, but about two hundred people showed up, many on bicycles, to march from Saldanha to Rossio via Almirante Reis avenue. Twice the PSP tried to remove protestors from the march and arrest them, supposedly to prevent egg throwing at banks, and twice they failed. The demonstration, in a single, cohesive body, unhesitatingly resisted the arrest attempts. On reaching Rossio, the march merged with that of Plataforma 15O. News soon spread of a phone call to BE’s satellite groups the night before, ordering them to withdraw from the initiative organized by Plataforma 15O, in which BE participated, and join the CGTP march. As if that weren’t enough, according to other news circulating in Rossio square, a member of the approaching Precários Inflexíveis had been attacked by CGTP marshals, who mistook the group for “anarchists.”

In the Chiado, the PSP policemen who had followed the demonstration since Saldanha and already threatened some protestors succeeded in arresting a stevedore who had been lighting petardos along the way. The demonstrators revolted, swiftly encircling and isolating the group of policemen detaining him, after which a first police charge left several people wounded. In response, the police received a barrage of chairs and cups from Pastelaria Benard. The first group of law enforcers, reassured by the arrival of the riot police sent to reverse the unfavorable numerical balance, went on a rampage, destroying everything in their path. Once again, footage would circulate widely of police attacking two journalists and a middle-aged woman. Parasols and tables from Café Brasileira were thrown to the ground, creating a buffer zone to stall the police advance and keep them at a distance, which was maintained until the end of the march. The demonstration dispersed rapidly on reaching the parliament, without further confrontations. This date marks the henceforth widespread use of criminal proceedings against protestors on the basis of video and photographic identification, which would be stepped up in the future. As a matter of fact, the court files on the first of those proceedings attested the use of a database to identify protestors (including at least photos, names and contacts), apparently created within the PSP, in complete breach of the laws and Constitution of the Third Republic, using the methods of a political police.

São Lázaro Squat

16 Precários Inflexíveis began as an informal group of precarious workers and unemployed people, mostly young, during the Mayday demonstrations in 2007 but came into formal existence in 2012.
17 Petardos, firecrackers that explode with a very loud noise, are frequently used by soccer ultras and organized fans at games.
On April 25, 2012, around two thousand people marched to the bairro of Fontinhina in Oporto to reclaim premises which, after a year-long occupation, had been evicted a few days earlier. Facing the threat of zero tolerance by PSP command, the demonstration evidenced the broad social and community support for the project as well as the willingness to challenge the intimidating strategies typical of a “state of exception.” For anyone who had come to consider – pardon our sarcasm! – the most combative moment in a protest as a choreographed dance with the police in which demonstrators first move backward and then race forward, this demonstration, those two thousand people and that reoccupation signaled the moment at which the soundtrack surged, covering the pictures on the screen and suggesting that history had reached a new level of intensity.

A thousand pages could be written about the experience of this occupation which today continues to reverberate everywhere. Nevertheless, certain aspects deserve particular attention. Right from the start, ES.COL.A stemmed from strong ties with the surrounding territory and the forms of life that inhabited it. It was not the occupation that emancipated the bairro, but the bairro that intensified the occupation, in a grassroots project built step-by-step by acquiring resources, knowledge, experience and the ability to work as a collective. Take, for example, the number and quality of posters, denouncing the presence of “means of production” and “labour power,” which are usually seen in more artistic scenes. ES.COL.A was not closed in on itself or even on the bairro, but rather swept across the entire city and let itself be crossed by it. Otherwise, it would not have brought out two thousands demonstrators.

Arguably, the confluence of multiple subjectivities and points of view in the ES.COL.A assembly (anarchists and left militants, vegetarians and gunas, artists and punks, etc.) kept the occupation from becoming a crystallization of identities and any one of its components from taking it over and manipulating it. The result – autonomy – seemed good. ES.COL.A demonstrated, amongst other things, that the occupation of spaces can be conceived, not as the search for refuge or a roof over one’s head, but as the indispensable material base for an offensive against modern urbanism and the capitalist organization of the city.

At the same time, as a multitude in Oporto was reoccupying the former school in Fontinha, in Lisbon, after the traditional procession commemorating the carnation revolution, some fifty people entered an abandoned four-storey building on São Lázaro street, the site of an earlier occupation evicted in 2010. In solidarity with what was happening at ES.COL.A, the building was occupied, this time with the ambition of preparing a little more than a pot of soup. The São Lázaro occupation also aimed at opposing the rotten peace of the institutional commemoration with a protest as combative as the long-forgotten memory it commemorated. Drawing together different tendencies that had come into

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18 Fontinha is a traditional working class district or bairro in Porto with a long and rich tradition of struggle.
19 ES.COL.A is both a play on the Portuguese word escola or school, which happens to be what the occupied space was before being abandoned by the city of Porto, and the acronym for the recuperated space itself, Espaço Colectivo Autogestionado (collectively self-managed space).
20 The word most commonly used in Porto to refer a ‘chav’ (mitra is more used in Lisbon).
contact over recent months in the streets and wherever the movement had passed, the occupation took a breath of the fresh air blowing in from Oporto.

What began as an ephemeral act of solidarity and protest was transformed into something larger when the police decided, perhaps more out of incompetence than zeal, to enforce the law by complying with the eviction procedure and legally stipulated deadlines. It should be stressed that, a few days earlier and two weeks after the ES.COL.A eviction, Lisbon's Housing Councillor Helena Roseta illegally approved a modified city regulation to shorten the deadline for eviction from occupied buildings, from ninety to ten days. After having publicly supported ES.COL.A., this laid bare the breadth of her hypocrisy.

In the following days and for a little more than a month, a bunch of people whose numbers grew daily, and who left their cliquish and identity-obsessed reactions at the door, organized a flurry of activities: repair and rehabbing of the building (abandoned to the pigeons and weather by Lisbon City Council (MCL) after the first occupation ended in 2010), meals for everyone, debates, concerts, performances, workshops and, above all, sharing of experiences and positions, which fuel the desire for a different kind of life. Unlike what usually happens on the antagonistic scene, the assemblies at São Lázaro were open to anyone and everyone who wanted to take part. Although this openness slowed the decision-making process and may have affected its coherence, the fact that people from very different backgrounds and with very different views came together made for richer discussion and discourse that appeared less codified to the outside world. In addition, and here again unlike what usually occurs in such occupations, the choice was made to maintain a constantly open line of communication with the outside, producing a discourse which, on the basis of the particular São Lázaro case, critiqued Lisbon's urban policies and the speculative interests behind them. By confronting the MCL's lies and the idiotic line fed by the news and media reports on the occupation, this strategy allowed many who had not participated directly in the São Lázaro occupation to identify and connect with what was happening.

All of this proved invaluable on May 31st when, in reaction to a violent eviction that morning accompanied by arrests and police brutality, Helena Roseta's office was invaded and, in the late afternoon, nearly three hundred people demonstrated. Traffic was blocked on Almirante Reis avenue, and riot police, who kettled protestors in front of Anjos church for more than two hours, checked almost everyone's identity and brought charges against more than a hundred of those detained. The sinister spectacle of an iniquitous trial had no other aim than the intimidation of all forms of protest. The São Lázaro occupation marked yet another invaluable stage in the movement's learning process and accumulation of experience. The appropriation of spaces and territories inside the city itself clearly empowered the construction of alternative dynamics and new forms of sociability. Any lingering ingenuousness about police repression faded with the realization that the Establishment responds brutally to perceived threats, suspending the rights and guarantees of constitutional
legality, imposing the law of brute force and mobilizing the judiciary to serve its repressive and authoritarian purposes.

September 15, 2012

On September 15th, hundreds of thousands of people flooded Lisbon's avenues in the largest demonstration since PREC. According to reports, more than a million protesters took to the streets throughout the country. Over the summer, a period of absolute calm, a call was launched for the demonstration on Facebook around the slogan “Que se lixe a troika!” (QSLT)\(^\text{21}\). When the government announced a reduction of the TSU\(^\text{22}\) for the bosses while doubling it for workers, the protest turned massive. The organizing collective emerged as the heir to the model inaugurated by the October 15th mobilizations, although any pretence of encompassing everything and everyone was dropped, a decision aimed at greater efficiency but which caused considerable controversy. From then on, participation in that decision-making body was by invitation or cooptation only.

During the march, a barrage of beer bottles and tomatoes was thrown at the IMF delegation's office, and several arrests were made. On Espanha square the organizers set up a stage for the closing speeches bringing the march to an end. During the speech-making, word got around and an unsatisfied multitude filled António Augusto Aguiar avenue, heading towards the parliament. Then a human pyramid graffitied “Everyone to São Bento!” on a huge billboard in the middle of the square, officializing the move and emptying the square. It seems that nothing happened between then and dawn the next morning, or rather, according to the media and professional commentators, nothing happened other than minor skirmishes between the police and a handful of small but dangerous radical groups, described by the SIC\(^\text{23}\) commentator as “the usual idiots.” What happened clearly challenged the ability of all those professionals of banality to understand and interpret.

For a few hours, downtown Lisbon experienced the most intense confrontations seen in years. Dozens of people tried to break through the police barrier protecting the parliament, while dozens of others, in an impressive firing line formation, threw rocks on the police, forcing the latter to tighten rank with their shields. Meanwhile, thousands more filled the square, cheering and applauding each time a policeman was hit by a petardo or bottle.

This went on for hours. Nothing, of course. “The usual idiots.” How could one forget those kids in shorts and flip-flops, covering their faces with their t-shirts, bare-chested and gripping paving stones in their hands. The atmosphere that night had more resemblance with the scene at six a.m. on Santa Luzia belvedere in Santo António, after a long night of drinking and partying, than with

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\(^{21}\) “Troika go to hell!”

\(^{22}\) The Taxa Social Única, a single social security contribution tax deducted from workers' wages and from business profits.

\(^{23}\) Sociedade Independente de Comunicação, a private television network and media company.
the square of São Domingos at six p.m. after an April 25th demonstration. The crowd consisted mainly, not of various leftwing factions, but of young people: youths in striped shirts and topsiders; youths from poor suburban neighbourhoods; youths from the city's working-class areas; youths who smoke weed in squares somewhere between Alvalade and Telheiras; youths whispering to each other that their mothers didn't know they were there; youths who are soccer ultras; youths who'd rather go to the Lux than to tascas; youths who saw Matrix and want to make history. Forget the images of a black bloc throwing Molotov cocktails in Syntagma square and picture instead a weekend night in the Bairro Alto, when people decide to go fight the police. In short order, those “uncontrollable elements” rejected any possibility of a flagrantly paternalistic pacifist approach, reaffirming a violent expression of revolt that was to alter the balance of forces.

The police was reported to have behaved well. There were no police charges on the demonstrators because no order had been given to do so or, more precisely, the order given was to charge solely as a last resort. In truth, the police did not charge because they could not, because the government would have had tremendous difficulty dealing with the scenes of violence if the police did charge and because the government would have had tremendous difficulty keeping control over the resulting situation. The risk would have been to turn a massive demonstration into a massive mutiny, without any assurance of regaining control otherwise than by resorting to extreme force. The confrontations did not get worse only because of the balance of forces on the stairs to the parliament. The police lacked the necessary room to charge and the demonstrators lacked the strength to break through the police line. That impasse fuelled the seething tension without ever causing it to boil over.

A few days after September 15th, the government, seemingly on the verge of collapse, abandoned the proposed change to the TSU. The street, henceforth aware of its strength, became unpredictable. Every week had its demonstrations, there were more and more protagonists in the social movement, and more and more events.

**The Hot Autumn of 2012**

On September 21st, while the Council of State met in Belém, a crowd of some ten thousand demonstrators gathered for a rally called by the September 15th organizers (QSLT). The scene was a jumble of chants, songs, exploding petardos, arrests by undercover officers, pacifistic appeals, party

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24 The comparison drawn here is between Lisbon’s equivalent to Carnival (the evening of 12 June) and the usual atmosphere in the square of São Domingos, that serves as a hangout spot following demonstrations and where ginginha (a popular traditional liqueur) is sold.
25 Popular nightclub/bar in Lisbon.
26 Traditional taverns/pubs, often serving very simple, traditional Portuguese snacks, meals and drinks like ginjinha, and sometimes featuring fado performers.
27 Popular bar district in Lisbon.
28 Belém Palace, the official presidential residency.
leaders insulted after appearing live on TV, and lots of police. Then on September 29th, hundreds of thousands of people congregated for a CGTP rally at Terreiro do Paço, part of whom marched to the parliament later that afternoon. The following week, on October 5th, various incidents disrupted the official ceremonies commemorating the founding of the Republic, and an anonymous appeal via the Internet to "Invade the Parliament" brought five hundred demonstrators to the streets. Once again, there were clashes with the police, throwing of petardos, and five people arrested for pulling down the police barrier blocking the stairs to the parliament. The next day, the most obvious aspect of the new social and political climate in the streets was recognized even by a newspaper as conservative as Expresso, which reported that the “demonstrators are predominantly young and some of them masked.”

The moments of protest as summer ended were frequently characterized by tense situations between the police and demonstrators, more and more of whom took a defiant, confrontational stance against authority, whether in street occupations without prior warning or in their way of opposing the police presence. In addition to issuing countless intimidating statements, the PSP hierarchy relied on infiltration by undercover officers, occasionally as agents provocateurs but more systematically to photograph and arrest demonstrators. Increasingly, policemen with cameras were posted at the top of the steps to the parliament to film demonstrators, an illegal practice repeatedly condemned by the National Commission for Data Protection. In fact, such breaches of the law by the police were a particularly striking sign of the radicalization of the conflict. Cracks in the idyllic façade of constitutionality increasingly revealed the real balance of power and the strategic dimension underpinning the workings of the repressive apparatus. For the first time in many years, the centres of power were palpably fearful of losing control over the situation, underlining the old maxim according to which politics is nothing more than the continuation of war by other means.

It is symptomatic that the heightened “tension” in the streets coincided with the changing social composition of the demonstrations and protests. The habitual activists and militants were now rubbing shoulders with stevedores, soccer ultras, suburban and ghetto kids, and unemployed workers on the down-and-out. The stevedores, with their cohesive force and rowdy presence, brought the struggle against the port restructurings into the streets, where their conflict became a symbol of the struggle opposing labour and capital. The presence of soccer ultras, familiar both with police methods of control and repression and with collective strategies to oppose them, was a sign of the spreading protest against austerity. The same was true of the kids from the suburbs and ghettos, accustomed to fighting vicious police repression daily and who had developed defence and protection mechanisms that they brought with them to the protests. During those weeks, the first press reports came out, decrying with increasing alarm the involvement of “foreign elements” and “violent radical groups” in those various occurrences, in a failed attempt to isolate the most combative segments of the movement from the others.

29 An immense square in downtown Lisbon near the Tagus River.
On Saturday, October 13th, QSLT organized a major cultural event against austerity on Espanha square, featuring a huge stage for concerts by various well-known artists, attended by thousands of people. The organizers, when asked to announce the "Siege of Parliament" scheduled for October 15th (the following Monday, when the 2013 State budget was to be introduced), responded with silence and avoidance tactics. During A Naifa’s concert, the group’s lead vocalist ended her song yelling "Everyone to Parliament, Monday at 6 p.m.!", a cry that was echoed by others.

That set the background and climate for a demonstration called by different groups, the first “Siege of Parliament,” which showed how easily an Internet announcement, relayed in no time by the social networks, could assemble thousands of people. The demonstration, fairly calm at the start, became more turbulent as night fell and even more people joined. All of a sudden the barriers were knocked down and, in spite of the strong police contingent, a series of attempts were made to approach the parliament building from various angles. A crowd as disparate as it was hostile to any kind of leadership or direction showed its ability to communicate within its ranks and maintain solidarity the whole time. By staying constantly in motion, spontaneously rather than according to a plan, it proved quite effective in taking the initiative away from the police. Several points are particularly worth stressing. First, the simultaneous rushes forward, without the slightest prior coordination or preparation and using different strategies (from petardos to locked arms, not to mention those who took off their clothes, threw rubber balls or bottles, played instruments or just shouted encouragements). Then also, the identification and eviction of two undercover officers, who were encircled and forced to retreat behind police lines. Last, the fire at the bottom of the stairs fuelled by paper, garbage and cardboard boxes.

After a few hours of this game, some of the protestors started marching up the Calçada da Estrela adjacent to the parliament building and headed towards the Prime Minister’s official residence. The riot police, pelted with rocks and bottles from a makeshift barricade of garbage bins, charged with dogs and proceeded to arrest people and club unresisting demonstrators who were just standing around watching. This would seem to have definitively exorcized the image of a pacified and obedient country bowing to the troika's bidding, reflected in the Finance Minister’s description of the Portuguese as “the best people on earth.” Meanwhile, a street so unpredictable and overrun by such a disparate crowd was beyond appropriation by party ringleaders of any stripe and beyond the comprehension of the TV commentators expected to decode its meaning. The movement’s strength lay in its ability to transform the rage running through it into something that could neither be translated nor represented in the public space of liberal democracy. It was then that the government began receiving warnings from quadrants and sectors within its own ranks concerning the need to rethink the effects of austerity from a political and social perspective. Rising poverty and unemployment were no longer perceived as social scourges deserving compassion but rather, with growing apprehension, as potential threats to the established order.
Another siege on October 31st, the date the State budget was voted, achieved a further leap forward in terms of complexity and radicalization. A report was published on this development on Indymedia Portugal:

The CGTP calls for a rally against the 2013 State budget which it takes as pillage, as do the supporters of QSLT, and other calls are circulating on the social networks, at the same time as the Assembly of the São Bento Siege, deciding to support the mobilizations under way, has convened another Assembly for November 1st at 4 p.m., open to anyone who wants to continue the struggle after the siege. This is without doubt an unprecedented convergence around the great day of protest in front of the parliament to take place on October 31st, when the State budget as a whole will be presented for approval.

In the CGTP's wake, the various PCP satellites converged at São Bento, where they were joined by a large contingent of stevedores arriving from a rally in front of the Ministry of the Economy. Later in the afternoon, the head of the trade-union federation Arménio Carlos, increasingly exasperated at having his speech constantly interrupted by exploding petardos and port workers' slogans, grabbed the mike to restore normality in the protest: “Comrades, I beg your pardon, but the meeting is here. Up there [in parliament], there's nobody, but the police are over there, leave the police alone, the police don’t hurt anybody, you guys. Nobody's afraid of the police. The rally is here, guys, not on the stairs. Let it go.” He was answered by the bang of a petardo. Following cries of “CGTP, trade-union unity!”, the sound system was dismantled and the protest declared over, at which point thousands of people flooded into São Bento. This once again blocked all of the exits to the parliament building, trapping some of the MPs inside and requiring a larger police presence. A report in the daily Público (symptomatically entitled “MPs leave parliament under a barrage of insults, assisted by the police”) summarized the day’s events:

As night fell, demonstrators knocked down the barriers protecting the steps to the parliament, where two ranks of PSP riot police had lined up at about 6:30 p.m. Objects were thrown at the police, and petardos exploded frequently. Police dogs were moved to the front line. Sometime after 7 p.m., the demonstrators lit a bonfire in front of the parliament. They chose the same location as on October 15th. Back then, the protest had ended with a police charge. This time, there were more explosions of petardos and more people with their faces covered.

All these situations of cooperation and mutual support produced the image of a strong, unified crowd that was impossible to control. Particularly significant were the numerous protestors with covered faces, a recurring feature in many of the protests to come. The point here is not to make a fetish out of the practice, but rather stress that it reflects the protesters' heightened awareness of the risk they run by uncovering their faces in an increasingly radicalized social conflict, where the blurred boundary between legality and illegality facilitates their identification by the police and bosses alike. Unlike situations in which a large police contingent could easily identify a nucleus of covered faces in the midst of a demonstration and then isolate and encircle them, what emerged in these moments was an absolutely natural community among protesters of different leanings and purposes, without any one part seeking to impose its presence on the others but all co-existing simultaneously, motivated by rage and solidarity against the government and repression. Once the police barriers
were knocked down, pensioners and middle-aged women could be seen alongside people wearing balaclavas and throwing petardos and bottles on the lawn adjacent to the parliament.

As people struggled and resisted, they also communicated and socialized, shared and disagreed, with no other aim than to join together in opposing a common enemy, although "join together" never meant being limited by or dependent on one another. That dimension of freedom and the absence of leadership transformed the rallies and parliament sieges into moments marking a complete break with the habitual marches and ritualized protests to which the left had accustomed us, where the street was more a crossing point than a meeting place and the revolt resembled an assorted catalogue of grievances and shortcomings. In October, on the contrary, there were very few who saw themselves as "victims" of an injustice committed by others and many, many more were ready to keep going as long as it took to get rid of those responsible for their situation. Given the opportunity to write their own history, they refused to be intimidated by the police and, by their presence and determination, released an energy that shook the very ground on which the government and the police stood. The shock waves of this earthquake continue to be felt today.

November 14, 2012

Thousands of people took to the streets on that day as part of a massive Europe-wide general strike, marking a major departure from the image of a Portuguese society submitting passively to austerity policies. The street was increasingly uncontrollable and turbulent, with millions of people on strike, combative picket lines, ATMs in flames, cobblestones from whole streets hurled against police lines, bank windows broken and burning barricades blocking the police. As the strike unfolded, however, it confirmed a major turning point in the State's strategy for dealing with the escalating manifestations of social conflict and also revealed some of the movement's weaknesses.

The first clashes occurred in the early morning, when some of the pickets lines set up by the CGTP were dispersed by the police, which resorted to force and made arrests. A picketer in the Carris strike was arrested in Musgueira30. The picket line at Vimeca, another Lisbon public transport company, was likewise subjected to police repression, including an attack on a woman trade unionist. On the CP31 Sado line, the brakes on several passenger cars designated for mandatory skeleton service suffered what company management described as "acts of vandalism." In Porto, a shot was fired at a bus in operation. At around midday in Lisbon, a demonstration on the stevedores' initiative, which was joined by a number of other groups, left Cais do Sodré32 for Rossio square to meet up with a demonstration called by QSLT. On the way, the protestors' unified action succeeded in preventing the police from

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30 Carris is Lisbon's public bus company. Musgueira is a neighborhood in northeast Lisbon, near the airport, where a major bus depot is located.
31 Comboios de Portugal, the publicly-owned rail system.
32 A major circle adjacent to a railway station and ferry interchange service.
arresting a protester for throwing a petardo. Converging at Rossio, the two demonstrations turned towards the parliament, leaving their mark on several banks as they went. At São Bento, the CGTP performed its usual ritual, with the secretary-general exhorting the crowd from the pulpit. Some responded by waving a swarm of flags while others waited for the mass to be over. The sermon ended on schedule, signalling the conclusion of the day of struggle. The situation, however, had changed radically. It was no longer enough for the CGTP to declare the party over for the party to effectively end, and even many of the trade union rank-and-file decided to stay on. In the charged atmosphere, there was a sense that something was about to happen. After the CGTP stage departed, the teeming square decided to remove the police barriers and climb the stairs. The riot police formed a line and began kicking and clubbing people at the front of the crowd, which finally retreated and spent almost an hour pelting the police with rocks, bottles and other objects.

The charge was broadcast live on TV. The police made sure the scene was filmed close up so the viewing public could hear the order to disperse, whether or not the demonstrators actually heard it, which in fact few had. That explains why some of the protestors found out about the impending police charge when called by friends watching the news. The police charged with a clear set of purposes: empty the square, trample anyone in the way, ensure media-relayed public punishment of random demonstrators to serve as an example for all, and restore order. But to everybody's surprise, order was not immediately restored. The enraged crowd spilled from the square and scattered into the streets radiating from São Bento, setting in motion one of the largest riots since the April 25th era. On at least four streets, barricades of burning garbage bins were erected instantly to stop the police advance. As the rioters gradually drew back, they built a secondary line, likewise in flames, thereby creating a kind of liberated zone that prevented swift police intervention. In the midst of all this revelry, the fire fighters arrived. While chatting amicably with the demonstrators, they refrained from putting out any fires, while a middle-aged man busied himself ripping out litter bins. Meanwhile, a CGD branch office was partially destroyed, a traffic light was torn down, and dozens of recycling bins, garbage containers and other street furniture were set on fire. The police continued to advance and, astounded by the impact of their own charge, set about chasing and randomly stopping people on the street. Finally, roughly two kilometres from the parliament, they ostentatiously arrested a dozen people walking around Cais do Sodré. In addition to those arbitrary arrests, others were held in custody outside the judicial map, as was noted in the following days by such legal experts as Guilherme Fonseca, retired judge of the Constitutional Court:

> Police action in repressing the demonstration, even when directed at putting an end to the marginal behaviours or events that occurred after a prolonged period of challenges by the demonstrators, may be described as excessive and disproportionate, in breach of constitutionally defined limits (...) in particular, and at a minimum, as concerns people present or passing by who had nothing to do with those

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33 Caixa Geral de Depósitos, Portugal's largest banking institution, owned by the State.
marginal behaviours or events. Consequently, excessive reliance on coercive means in material police operations, involving the use of clubs, which is unconstitutional and not covered by the Law of Internal Security, could theoretically justify exercising the right of resistance on the part of the demonstrators, as is recognized by Article 21 of the CRP [Constitution of the Portuguese Republic].

So, here we have a huge general strike, the largest demonstration on a strike day in Lisbon, which was heading towards the parliament and attacking the police line with a hail of cobblestones. We have an extremely violent police charge against hundreds of demonstrators, followed by gigantic turmoil throughout the city. We have no doubt that fear was on the side of political power that day and that the latter's response was to launch an even broader array of repressive and criminalizing means. That very evening, Minister Miguel Macedo showered praise on the CGTP's orderly behaviour and on the subsequent political persecution of demonstrators on TV and in the newspaper. The government seemed to have opened Pandora's Box.

The processes developing in the streets and in the movement could get out of hand rapidly, and although a display of sheer force might initially succeed, the political consequences could be severe. The time had come for the State to resort to intimidation of the movement, in order to clearly demonstrate not just its military strength but its territorial domination: given the State's inability to control certain collective moments, it reacted with repression and judicial persecution – individual, isolated, and hidden from public view. The institutional agents all scrambled to support the police charge or kept chillingly silent, thereby fostering virtual unanimity in public discourse around the notion that the confrontations had in truth been the work of half a dozen professional troublemakers and thus limiting the controversy to questions of repressive methodology. The consensus condemning the rock-throwing was challenged only here and there, by a handful of the more intrepid analysts like Público columnist Vitor Belanciano:

I was pained yesterday to see friends with bloody faces, but if you want to know what pains me even more, it's hearing the same stock phrases repeated today by policemen, trade unionists and politicians, without anything new, without any new conclusions, an enormous void, between debasement tinged with paternalism and disavowal lacking any structured reasoning. (...) The various spheres of power adore “professional protestors.” They're useful. But yesterday, it was more than that. And the next time will be worse.

As the general strike cooled down, leftwing public opinion, from commentators to leaders, lost no time aligning with the government-inspired media spin: it was inconceivable that the “good Portuguese people” could commit such acts of savagery in front of the house of democracy. Depending on one's political stripe, different scapegoats were pinpointed, while reducing the number of participants, initially to just twenty or thirty and subsequently to a mere fifteen or ten. They were purportedly foreigners, radicals imported from Spain, anarchists, hooligans, mitras, undercover police officers, etc. In times of crisis, public opinion gravitates towards an unprecedented national unanimity: we Portuguese, a calm and peaceful people, couldn’t have been responsible, it must have
been foreign agents, marginal individuals, calculating schemers. While the confrontations revealed a lack of truly consequent thinking about mass illegality, the following period only reconfirmed the movement’s inability to organize and structure its own discourse, uninfluenced by the cringing consensus fed by the media. Beyond defending the confrontations or not, the movement proved unable to even understand and analyze them, capitulating entirely to the bodies in charge of normalizing and nullifying critical thought and handing the lead over to public opinion-makers and mouthpieces overwhelmed by recent events. The most consistent version finally won out: eight and a half nuts had endangered constitutional legality, the police could easily have arrested the seven people, and, for those five people, the thousands of inattentive people around them would have to pay. All of this served to deflate the pre-insurrectional crescendo forming since the summer and to impose a deafening silence while the newspapers launched a witch hunt and the social conflict shifted to the hallways of RTP\(^{34}\). It was obvious, reading between the lines of news reports, that the government was orchestrating a campaign of political repression, including plans for a “secret” service hidden inside the PSP to gather intelligence with which to compile a database on the movement. The hot Autumn gave way to winter, and people went home to lick their wounds and budget for the upcoming Christmas festivities.

March 2, 2013

At this low ebb in the movement, rumours circulated that the QSLT collective was going to organize yet another rally on March 2\(^{nd}\). By then, the platform included various party militants, and for the first time the movement’s "leadership" and the leftwing officials were able to work things out without running into any major obstacles. Once the terms of the protest had been defined, the assembly was opened to the movement.

A vast political marketing campaign was launched: countless texts were penned in support of the protest, and symbols and images of the call were used widely, giving the mobilization a seemingly infinite dimension. Meanwhile, after a speech by Prime Minister Passos Coelho before Parliament was interrupted by protestors singing “Grândola vila morena”\(^{35}\), similar interruptions perturbed public events by government officials all over the country. Minister Miguel Relvas was forced to flee a conference at the ISCTE\(^{36}\) via the rear of the building, where the security guards protecting him were encircled by students. A huge police detachment surrounded Passos Coelho when he appeared at the besieged Law Faculty. These were all signs of the kind of decadent atmosphere typical of an end

\(^{34}\) Radio Televisão Portuguesa, the Portuguese public broadcaster. A conflict emerged within it after the Workers Council denounced the delivery to the police of unedited footage, decided by the board of directors and leading to the resignation of the network News editor.

\(^{35}\) Song by José Afonso played on the early morning of April 25, 1974 to signal the commencement of the military coup. It’s lyrics have a marked left-wing inclination and it was banned by censorship under fascism.

\(^{36}\) A University in central Lisbon, comprising a business school and several social sciences.
of cycle, while at the same time more and more texts supporting the movement called for a repetition of April 25th, imparting solemnity worthy of an event of historical magnitude.

The day arrived for the demonstration, bringing out hundreds of thousands of people who marched together, manifesting neither excessive outrage nor joy. On reaching Terreiro do Paço, half of the crowd stood singing “Grândola” to a platform where the organizers, carnations in hand, delivered speeches and then departed. By the time the other half reached the square, it was empty and shadowed in darkness.

Over the following days, a series of declarations expressed a triumphalism inversely proportional to the tone of the demonstration, and contradictory interpretations abounded as to the number of protestors and their “silences.” For the first time in two years, there was a demonstration that stood out, not for what it brought forth, but because nothing happened. It earned praise for the precise reason that it contrasted with previous demonstrations, events that had contained their own autonomous narrative. On March 2nd, the street was once again a sound bite conceived by the left in its quest for legitimacy as a vehicle of political representation, as a mass of people turning to a handful of specialists who would then translate what those people actually wanted to say. In a sense, the demonstration represented a victory for the part of the movement that always thought, however secretly or openly, that its ultimate purpose was to impose a political moment for the institutional left to surf on and to act as the binder in the mythical union of (almost) the entire left wing. While it would be premature to speculate about the demonstration’s consequences or venture other interpretations, this much is clear: unlike all the other moments discussed above, each of which opened a door to the next, the March 2nd protest appears to have hit a wall. As soon as the street turned towards the institutions, the political initiative fell to that space. At the same time, this shift obliged the movement to reconsider its form and rendered the model so recently proposed obsolete – that of a mass demonstration asserting itself as the sole voice of the people, to be obeyed by the government. Even now, the situation is determined by the picture painted on that second day of March.

**We live in interesting times**

Our intention was to relate a brief narrative of the movement, without claiming to erect impregnable barricades or trace a line in the sand separating good and bad, revolutionary and reformist, anarchist and authoritarian, rational and naïve. The problems we identified in the movement are our own and we fully assume them as such. We felt the need to share this assessment of the past two plus years with those who were part of the movement, crossed it and pushed it forward – during which we met and parted ways, converged and diverged, talked and listened – precisely because we consider it the space where we can conceive of a life beyond the State and capitalism, beyond wage labour and the
separation between representatives and represented. Our critiques do not depart from any feeling of hostility, and we hope that if they sometimes seem severe, this will not become an obstacle to communication. What we have written is intended, not as a full stop, but as a starting point. In no way is our intention to prescribe a recipe on the basis of a diagnosis supposedly put forward. What we wanted was to introduce a few dissonant notes in the apparently harmonious concert that we’re hearing all around us, in which each player has a time and place but the score raises a number of objections.

To start with, we have identified a fluctuating and variable tension over the past two and half years between, on the one hand, the wealth of desires and attitudes visible in the anti-austerity protests and, on the other, the efforts to steer those protests towards institutionalized channels in order to confine the revolt and contention to demands for better government. Our concern is not with opposing moderate methods and other, supposedly more radical, methods, with challenging various strategies considered irrelevant or ill-intentioned, with attacking an embryonic movement leadership in the hope of taking its place or with presenting an umpteenth genuine revolutionary program. On the contrary, our presence in the streets and the connections linking formerly separated people suggest to us that more can be expected of the current times than a leftwing government, real democracy or a more robust civil society.

The revolt hovering in the air reveals immense dissatisfaction with the forms of existence offered by capitalism, whether in their more sophisticated and alluring variations or in the others, more prosaic and familiar, evidenced by precariousness, mass unemployment and poverty, by boredom, suffering and oppression. We recognize in the revolt a possibility which encompasses a range of possibilities: separation, secession, subtraction from that mode of production and that governance; development in common of new forms of life on the basis of cooperation and sharing; formation of a power, a material force, a war machine capable of reclaiming spaces, instruments, bodies and knowledge from the Empire, by letting our desires trace a line of flight. Far from hiding our weaknesses and limitations, we are well aware of them and know too well that much remains to be done, that it is already late and yet still too early, that there are many things to learn and many more to invent. This is not a program, a founding congress or a convocation for the constitution of a new International. It is, quite simply, an invitation to play, a call to travel together along the rough, branching path that opens before us, even though it entails choices and risks. In front of us lay the unknown and the unpredictable. We live in interesting times.