

Political Lessons From Greece: Fake Social Movements and the Role of “Alter-Summits”

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Between June 7th and June 9th we had 3 contrasting experiences in Athens. One was attending the European Alter Summit over 2 days; another was marching with Gay Pride on the evening of June 8th and the third was meeting with a group of Somalian refugees in their apartment of 3 rooms where 11 of them lived.

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Alter Summit

The Alter Summit was a two-day meeting of supposed social movements from across Europe held in the Olympic stadium in the outer suburbs of Athens. United in their resistance to austerity, deeply concerned and angry about the huge damage being done to the poorest and most vulnerable, especially women, children, refugees and undocumented peoples, they all shared a common concern and a motivation against injustice. But there was something missing, and it was mostly the presence of those on whose behalf they were meeting.

Like other social summits and similar events, some of those present represented real social movement from below; a stirring of the people in one way or another. But many felt strangely disconnected from the ‘movements’ on whose behalf they worked to expose and publicise, to organise petitions and protests and to persuade those in power to do something about a rapidly deteriorating situation. They did not feel like social movements as much as campaign groups.

And these campaigns have now been going on for years, and the situation gets worse, The truth is that those with wealth and power are not going to make things better; they’re not inclined to give up what they’ve got. They don’t need more information and reports: they already know perfectly well what social and economic devastation their actions have led to, and in the end probably care only for themselves and their interests. So what is the point of all this lobbying and pushing for crumbs from the table?

Episodic Events

The sessions we went to on refugees and then on poverty were on the whole disappointing. Too much ‘ego’ around in the sense that the sessions were dominated by representatives of various groups telling us about what they do. This seemed to be the main purpose of the summit. All of the projects were deeply committed to their activity, even though it was

abundantly clear for some their prospects of success were non-existent. This was especially true for those projects which were trying to force EU institutions to implement or shift policy towards providing a range of basic incomes to allow people to live in dignity. Such actions by the EU would fly completely in the face of its current and sustained neo-liberal assault on the well-being of the people. Change will not happen in this way nor from that quarter.. But sadly, the audience was too polite to ask such basic questions which in turn acts as a kind of sanction to continue with futile initiatives.

It was also interesting for us to see that many of the groups tended to focus on organising episodic events such as a day of action, organising a rally or similar event. Great energy is expended in organising these grandstand events that mark the core political activity of the group. And from what we heard in the meetings, they were assessed primarily by the numbers of people attending the event. This was reinforced during a lunch-time conversation with a revolutionary socialist who had travelled from London. In answer to my questions about what was going on in England he gave details only of recent national demonstrations and strikes and the numbers involved. These events were for him what defined political activity and even then there was little apparent concern about what happened later as it was on to the next event. In his case, he was wondering about who and how many will join with the Peoples' Assembly which was to hold its inaugural national meeting in June.

No one questioned this common strategy. At least not when we were present.

Disconnections

We view the disconnection between these organisations and those whom they want to help as a problem. We might wish it to be otherwise. Indeed it is widely held and argued that only self-directed activity from the grass roots will secure the revolution. Yet there seems to be some distance between the rhetoric and the practice. We need to ask some hard questions.

One thing we learnt at the Summit is that many of the groups are small and simply don't have the capacity to do very much. It doesn't help either that some groups, as noted earlier, are simply wasting their efforts. With few resources, organising episodic events has clear attractions being more achievable than say more enduring and immediate acts of solidarity such as monitoring police stations and cells to simply being there in their neighbourhoods and having a coffee. So maybe there is a basic issue of capacity. We don't know. But from what we heard from the refugees, one-off events have virtually no lasting impact and don't address acutely pressing survival needs.

Some of the processes which reinforce separation are more banal but no less devastating. During the session on refugees for example, we asked whether any thought had been given to locating the Summit more centrally so that it would have been possible for refugees and many of those most affected by austerity to join in the discussions. After all much was being made during this meeting of the statement of the World Assembly of Migrants.... in which it clearly stated that "we call for: a) The promotion of the migrants' participation in social forums, especially the undocumented....." And yet here in the Olympic velodrome there was an almost complete absence of those most hurt and abused.

The chair immediately responded by claiming that this Summit was for social movements, for their development and growth and when they were ready then that would be the right

time to engage with the 'grass roots'. This response was warmly received and suggests that the choice of location was deliberate to ensure seclusion to do their business. Should this be the case then more ferocious questions need to be asked!

When we discussed this with a small group of refugees one young guy questioned their authority to speak on his behalf but for the majority it was seen as a lost opportunity to share experiences and to build trust. Many told us that it makes them feel stronger when they feel the solidarity of others sharing their pain, their concerns and their dreams. But what many took exception to was those who spoke on their behalf but knew nothing of their lives and histories.

Prior to the Alter Summit we had been with some of the refugee communities for the past few weeks. As we described in recent articles we experienced a daily, urgent struggle to survive. A survival that was more than staying physically alive but fighting for dignity, and humanity. And the key to their survival was the range and depth of their solidarities. For a variety of reasons (poverty, police harassment most prominently) the refugees spent many hours inside their homes or visiting friends. They had time to talk. They shared experiences. Above all, they struggled to understand their treatment in Greece. For many it was a huge trauma for them to discover that Europe, and Greece in particular, the home of democracy, could be so much like the places they had sought to escape with state violence, endemic corruption and above all where they were considered as garbage. There is a great deal of learning going on amongst the refugees as they work out why they face these intolerable situations.

This is crucially important activity which helps sustain the resistance of the refugees but set against episodic events it does not seem to register. Moreover the disconnections between the activists in the social and Left movements goes even deeper. In all our discussions with the refugees we came across no examples of ongoing links between themselves and refugee aid bodies, anti-fascist groups, Left political parties and so on. As far as the refugees were concerned they were not on their radar in any shape or form. They were not part of their networks of and for survival. It seems to us that we need to ask why is this the case?

On the streets

By coincidence, in the middle of the alter summit was the Athens Gay Pride celebration and protest. For the Saturday evening the centre of the city was blocked in a riot of floats, banners, music and laughter. It was such a positive change from the usual political demonstrations here.

In the days preceding the Pride march there was much speculation that Golden Dawn would make its presence known and even attack Pride. The Somalians knew all too much about Golden Dawn and especially its presence amongst the police which made their daily routines hell. Athens Pride was resolute in its response saying that they would not be intimidated off the streets and that if Golden Dawn came then they were ready for them. The Somalians are no less resolute although in different ways. Their lack of documentation makes them immediately vulnerable to police harassment and endless messing about in police stations, but it does not stop them from going out. It does not stop them from creating free spaces on the streets where the police and or Golden Dawn fear to enter. The Somalian men play on the sexism of the police in that they are much less likely to be stopped when they go out with their wives and girlfriends. It is this sexism which ironically

gives the Somalian women more freedom than their men to move in public with less fear of harassment.

Solidarity

Central to the resistance in both Pride and the refugee household was solidarity. The humour, music, sense of joy, friendship and inter-action between those marching in Pride was wonderful and in marked contrast to so many Left demonstrations. Claiming the streets and taking over a plateia for dancing and great music, for standing up and saying we are not afraid, was liberating. Look what we can do! The Somalian household was no less inspiring to us, as we talked about their experiences, their survival, their struggles and their ways of living together. There was much laughter as well as deep sadness for they feel terribly trapped in Greece and could see no easy way to get out.

But in the meantime they lived. Decisions were taken collectively, tasks shared, although those with particular talents say in cooking took lead roles in those areas. We wondered if the household operated along traditional gender lines. This provoked some humorous outrage amongst the men and laughter from the women. At home they told us that power in the household went to the oldest usually male member, but they didn't follow that pattern and were much more open and democratic. Moreover, in their home, if there was any one who they looked to in the final analysis it was to H, the youngest of the women who had a four year old son with her. This was in a current household of 5 women and 6 men. All tasks, whether washing, cleaning, cooking were shared as was the responsibility for finding the rent of 600 euros each month.

Fighting for a better world demands solidarity which in turn depends so much on trust. The refugees are well aware of how they are continually demonised especially as Muslims and they know that this is not restricted to a racist minority. We told some of our friends that we had received comments on some of our recent articles about the solidarities of the refugees that sought to explain it as a special 'Muslim' characteristic. These kinds of comments and the endless portrayal of Muslim men as sexists and Muslim women as passive and cowed, infuriates and frustrates. Why they asked are they constantly seen through a religious filter? Why is this is not applied equally, so we would read about the Greek Orthodox thief/ thug/ Golden Dawn or whatever?

It seems too obvious to say, but we need to hear the voices of the oppressed and victimised and to put an end to the notion that they have nothing to say.

Bottom-Up Pressures

Few of the proposals for action we heard at the Alter Summit seemed to be influenced from bottom up pressures. The time lines for action were more than enough to illustrate this absence.

The immediacy of trying to survive is overwhelming. It takes up most of your physical and emotional energy. It means daily uncertainty. Problems are acute and often demand immediate attention. It is a highly emotional experience with feelings raging from anger to despair. But these were not the sentiments that drove the initiatives we heard about. . Of course words were said about the violence of austerity on so many people now, but from the standpoint of the refugees at least, words are not enough any more. They want to see action. They want their ghettos to be breached from the outside as people come and join

them on the streets, in their cafés and in their homes. To stand with them and by them as they are rounded up by the police; to be there in the police stations. To talk with them. They no longer want to feel so alone. This would mean so much more than some periodic rally.

They want this solidarity. So many have learnt that the 'system' seeks to divide people and makes a lot of theatre about differences which builds hatred and confusion. Their discussions are full of reference to humanity and justice. Above all, they want to show the world that they are people, human beings, no more or less than anyone else.

But what the Alter Summit revealed to us is that the disconnect between the groups/movements and their actual bases will continue to persist unless the groups look closely at themselves. We suspect that many activists have been (understandably) influenced by the politics of expertise which was so prevalent as an instrument of social control throughout much of the capitalist world during the 20th century. It was a politics that brought with it arrogance and distance between the authorised knower and the plain ignorant. It sat easily with deeply sedimented views that saw those at the bottom of the social heap as garbage and those at the top as virtuous and talented. It also sits easily within some Left traditions where notions of vanguardism have given rise to autocratic leaderships which are disdainful of their base. Whatever their source, there is more than enough evidence to suggest that the whiff of arrogance has not yet been seen off amongst those from whom we expect more.

Embracing our sisters and brothers

Although we have focussed on the refugees, we believe that much of what we say applies to many of the most marginalised, impoverished and vulnerable. They are too often left out in practice if not by intent. Without an unconditional embrace of all those who suffer most, the tyranny of the minority will continue. We need to be unrelenting in looking at what we do and when we do it. In much of western Europe a catastrophe is engulfing ever larger numbers of people. It is a material attack on well being as lethal as any weapon. But it is made so much worse because it is accompanied by an ideological onslaught which has all but removed any voices being heard from those most affected and has explicitly encouraged the victims to be reviled as the culprits.

This needs to be stopped. For the refugees, there is a recurring observation that in Europe animals are far better protected from abuse and humiliation than they themselves. Why? they ask. Why? Is the question all of us should be asking.

The ghettos must be breached, with humanity flowing in to embrace the refugees, the poorest, and most vulnerable as fellow human beings. We must join them in their neighbourhoods, to stand by and with them, and build up the connections of solidarity and trust. We need to understand that political activism is much more than organising some one off event no matter how well attended. We must also understand that one of the most virulent aspects of neo-liberalism has been its impact on minds as well as bodies. It has above all else massively extended and deepened individualism with all its virulent anti-social dimensions. It makes real sense therefore to recognise the importance of what the refugees are saying about the kinds of solidarities that need to be encouraged and deepened now. As they repeatedly say, all we want is to be treated as human beings, and that includes being able to dance and sing on the streets.

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