

PARLIAMENT, ART AND THE MANY. SOME REFLECTIONS

In 2017, theatre director Milo Rau organized a collective performance in Berlin's government district. Entitled 'Sturm auf den Reichstag' (The Storming of the Reichstag), it was intended as a central part of a project called 'General Assembly', dedicated to representing the idea of a democratic world parliament. On August 29th, 2020, a 'storm' on the Reichstag of an entirely different nature came to pass during a so-called 'Querdenker' demonstration against Covid-19 measures. This was initiated and led by nationalist, far-right protest members, who spent few, but media-effective minutes waving 'Reich' flags – the former German imperial, nationalist colours of black, red and white – on the steps of parliament. Only three police officers confronted the right-wing protesters. Later, they were formally honoured as heroic defenders of democracy by the Federal President at Schloss Bellevue. The attack had justifiably caused public outrage among the political class. Taking an idea of the political left and misappropriating it to the ends of right-wing causes, stunting its original intent, is not new. And yet, this incident can, and should, be regarded as a wake-up call. Casting doubt on parliament, the heart chamber of representative democracy, calls into question democracy as a whole. Whenever this kind of attack is launched by the nationalist right, our reaction is palpably alarmed, because despite our critical challenges to the current political system, we by no means support pivoting towards a patronizing, authoritarian state. Rather, we want to push the state towards progressive development in the sense of 'daring more democracy'. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that the question whether our current system is willing or capable of taking such a trajectory is still open. In short, we need to talk: about our relation to the representative system, to parliament, and how we move and situate ourselves in society.

after the butcher. ausstellungsraum für zeitgenössische kunst und soziale fragen, in collaboration with Belgian philosopher Dieter Lesage, has seized the initiative to invite a number of authors, artists, theorists and cultural workers to reflect these questions. Originally planned as a series of events spanning several months and covering the topic 'Parliament, Art and the Many', the pandemic has called for a change in arrangements. Instead, we will be releasing different texts on the subject, the first of which will appear as

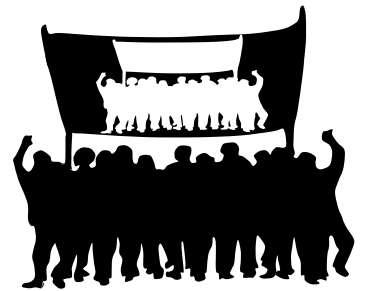
butchers blätter by Milo Rau & IIPM, Alice Creischer and Andreas Siekmann, as well as Dieter Lesage. We hope you enjoy reading and thinking – and also to spark a lively discussion.

Thomas Kilpper, Franziska Böhmer & Ina Wudtke

A Note on Parliament and The Many

Dieter Lesage

It may seem ages ago now, but just before a regional epidemic would develop into the Pandemic that has been taken the lives of too many while deeply affecting the lives of many others, a phrase had been haunting the globe – We are the many. Some people may think that something about this phrase is, or was, extremely troubling, if not frightening, whereas others may find this phrase is, or was, a most joyful one. It probably depends on whether you think of yourself as belonging to the many or not. In any case and now more than ever, the phrase “we are the many” raises a lot of questions and issues. What exactly does it mean? What are we saying when we say that we are the many? When do we say it? Where does this phrase come from? What does this phrase aim at? Does it assemble or does it divide? Is it true or do we just pretend that we are the many when we say that we are the many? If we say that we are the many when we assemble, who are the others that are not considered part of our assembly? And if we say that we are the many, do we say the same as when we are saying that we are many? What about the meaning of a series of other phrases which seem similar to the phrase “we are the many”, phrases such as “we are the people” or even the phrase “we are the 99 %”? Do these phrases all say the same? What kind of concept of the many emerges from the interwoven histories of all these phrases? Who are the many and how do they relate to those who claim to represent them? Are representatives part of the many which they represent, or do representatives belong to those others of the many, whom a history as long as the history of the concept of “the many” itself, has given the name of “the few”? To say that “we are the many” could be understood as a poetic phrase of protest against the positions and actions of others whom we outnumber or claim to outnumber. We are the many. Depending on contexts and constellations, the others could be very different groups. However, whatever the context or the constellation, the idea seems to be that we who are the many and who outnumber others, should be able to determine what is to be done in, by and for the community in which we outnumber or claim to outnumber those others. If we insist that we are the many, it seems that we suppose that, if it were true that we are the many, it should have particular consequences, depending on what it



means to be the many in the context and constellation within which we insist that we are the many. To say that we are the many could mean that we are the majority. But what does that mean? In so far as the political community in which we are the many is organised as a parliamentary democracy – which is not necessarily the case for all of us – and given the role of majorities in it, this could mean that we expect parliament to follow or to decide what we, who are the many, want or propose. However, can a parliament indeed be supposed to follow a self-declared majority of people who are not in parliament? Is this what we are when we say that “we are the many”: a self-declared extra-parliamentary majority which claims that it should be listened to? Is it possible that, among the others which we oppose or contest when we say that we are the many, there are always already the members of parliament too?

It seems that we may have encountered the phrase “we are the many” in contexts and constellations where a self-declared extra-parliamentary majority indeed derives political claims from the fact that, although it is not in parliament, it constitutes or considers itself a majority of the population and thus something to be reckoned with, also by parliament, whatever the actual majority in parliament may be. If we say that we are the many, we sometimes mean to say that we are more the majority than the majority in parliament, even if that parliamentary majority derives its claims from the fact that it has (once) been elected by (some of) us. However, it should come as no surprise that, in some contexts and constellations, the phrase “we are the many” turns out to be a contestation of parliamentary democracy itself. In that case, none of us who are the many seems to expect anything from parliament and its elected members, as their majority seems to be a very different one from the one that we say that we are. If there is something troubling about the phrase “we are the many”, then it probably is this radical ambiguity or the ambiguity of its radicality. If we say that we are the many, do we actually demand something from those who are considered to be our representatives in parliament, or do we, to the contrary, believe that we can only be represented by the many that we are ourselves? What exactly is, conceptually speaking, the relationship between Parliament and the Many? And what would be the role of art in this relationship?

General Assembly - The Manifesto

Milo Rau & IIPM

THEY CALL IT DEMOCRACY – WE CALL IT EXPLOITATION!

The German parliament has just been elected. But not even a fraction of those affected by German policy are represented in the Bundestag. Even in the age of

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mass migration and climate change, global politics are controlled by national lobbies – and prevented whenever they adversely affect the interests of these lobbies. Now that the AfD has become the third political power in Germany, national tendencies in the Bundestag have been strengthened yet again. A national parliament, however, which globally enforces its interests, is not a place of democracy. It is an instrument of domination and exploitation.

DEMOCRACY FOR EVERYONE AND EVERYTHING!

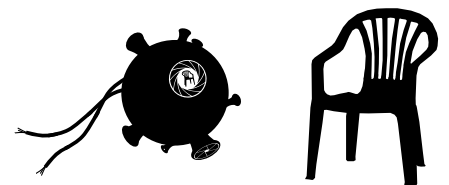
War victims, labor migrants, economic and climate refugees, the victims of the dawning ecocide, children, the unborn and the victims of colonial history – they all have no right to a say in the Reichstag. But what would happen if all those whose lives are influenced by the German Bundestag were to assemble and claim their rights? The “General Assembly” and the “Storming of the Reichstag” will give their concerns a voice and offer their non-simultaneity a moment of simultaneity. A local parliament will be replaced by a global parliament. For the first time, the global Third Estate will claim its rights: one world, one parliament!

100 PERCENT IS NOT ENOUGH!

We are the 99 percent, was Occupy Wall Street’s slogan. We of the “General Assembly” say: 100 percent is not enough! The “General Assembly” is not only the first World Parliament in the history of mankind, it is also the first World Parliament in the history of animals and things. It includes the bees of Provence, the oceans as well as the cyborgs. The world is a community of fate, beyond all nationalities, periods, and forms of existence. We finally need an instrument that can regulate the world market and direct ecological developments into the right channels. Let’s escape the spiral of exploitation, destruction and violence! Let’s enter the “General Assembly”! Let us meet in front of the Reichstag and claim our rights!

Parliament, The Art and The Many

Alice Creischer and Andreas Siekmann



When we hear “We are the Many”, another slogan immediately comes to mind, a slogan we often read in the 1990s: “I am many”. The slogan was intended to resist attributions of race, class and gender, by retreating – so it seemed to us – to a sort of bastion of multiple selves. These multiple-Is, however, were as helpless to us as an embryonic freedom, coiled up in itself. At the same time they became a limitless resource, a goldmine for the exploitation of lifetime and subjectivity in

the atomised world of work and extorted consumption. It always seemed to us as if these multiple-I chambers, the exits of which were blocked by suspicion, only referred to themselves and that the Other was just a screen onto which that self was projected.

On Saturday 29 August 2020, we visited the Quer-Denken demonstration in Berlin, which ended with a “Storming of the Reichstag”. We now saw these multiple-Is gathered together, sitting on the grass, singing and meditating. We saw multiple-Is on the podium, shouting peace, love and the ‘historical importance of this present moment’ into the microphone, as if each I was now its own sports stadium, drunk on the reverb of its own voice, amplified over the squares, lawns, tarmac and facades of empty buildings, facades you could label ‘the State’, like turning your own insides out. We saw an I shouting through a megaphone at his own image on his mobile phone. Another wore a sign which read ‘I am my own sovereign’.

What is the interior? Leibniz described the soul as a monad, an indivisible particle, equipped with an aperture like a camera obscura or darkened chamber, in which it can reflect the “best of all possible worlds”. But the aperture - this iris of thin little steel sheets - doesn’t open any more. The world bounces off it, as if the steel were a mirror, as if the mirror were a shield, behind which there was no longer any chamber but a pit perhaps - a pit as large as the one an exploited mine leaves behind, like the ones left behind by the extraction of rare metals necessary for making communicating machines.

We remember another “Storming of the Reichstag”. Two years previously, Milo Rau organised a ‘global parliament’ in the Schaubühne Theatre in Berlin. It culminated in a “Storming of the Reichstag”. A small group assembled, some activists were placed on a rented truck, signs read ‘Democracy for everyone and everything’ and cameras captured the events. Some shouted “Theatre has become reality” at sceptical passers-by like us, with the old longing and the old craving to eradicate this determination for direct action.

If the soul possessed a darkened space, which enclosed the world’s reflection like a box, if the world’s reflection could never claim the entire soul but if this world in the soul dived into an uncertain space in which broken pieces of mirror were misplaced or forgotten; long paths were needed in this space in order to fetch this and that from the world and were always reassembled the wrong way, then all this, which you might call cognition and not reflection, is what theatre possesses as a darkened space in the audience which behaved just as uncertainly and unpredictably as the soul. It can be said that this darkened space between author and reader, between picture and viewer, effects all the arts.

What does this space have to do with the state? In their book *To Our Friends, The Invisible Committee* wrote, "Occupation of the Kasbah in Tunis and of the Syntagma Square in Athens, siege of Westminster in London during the student movement of 2011, encirclement of the parliament in Madrid on September 25, 2012 or in Barcelona on June 15, 2011, riots all around the Chamber of Deputies in Rome on December 14, 2010, attempt on October 15, 2011 in Lisbon to invade the Assembleia da Republica, [...]: the places of institutional power exert a magnetic attraction on revolutionaries. But when the insurgents manage to penetrate parliaments, presidential palaces, and other headquarters of institutions, [...], it's only to discover empty places, that is, empty of power, and furnished without any taste; [...] the truth is that power is simply no longer that theatrical reality to which modernity accustomed us. Yet the truth about the actual localization of power is not hidden at all; [...] For confirmation of this, one only has to look for a moment at the banknotes issued by the European Union. [...] what is it that appears on euro banknotes? Not human figures, not emblems of a personal sovereignty, but bridges, aqueducts, arches [...]. Power now resides in the infrastructures of this world [...] in the form of a high-voltage line, a freeway, a traffic circle, a supermarket, or a computer program. And if it is, it's hidden like a sewage system, an undersea cable, [...], or a data center in the middle of a forest. Power is the very organization of this world, this engineered, configured, purposed world. [...] It has the neutral appearance of facilities or of Google's blank page." [The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, (Translated by Robert Hurley), South Pasadena, Semiotext(e), 2015, pp. 81-84].

Can we (how can we) simply write off these protests against the austerity policies of about ten years ago in alignment with the Is of the Covidiot? It is the facades that produce these alignments, they find their pawns in these multiplied-Is.

Back to the world though, bouncing off the facade of the parliament building and the irises of its subjects. On 7 September 2020, 13,000 empty chairs stood in front of the stage-like parliament building, for the 13,000 Moria refugees living in a camp originally intended for 3000 people. Refugee organisations reported that after the first Corona cases, the Greek government fenced in the camp, locking the people within it. On 9 September 2020 the news came that the camp burnt down in the night, just like other overcrowded camps or overcrowded temporary worker shelters have done as a desperate last attempt to escape. So much for the world beyond the iris and the facades.

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