

Tactics

There has been a noticeable change on the streets of Greece in the last few years. The momentum of large protests which built from December 2008 through 2010 and 2011 bursting out into the open on February 12th 2012 has disappeared, for the moment at least. The feelings of initiative and possibility are no longer present in most demonstrations in Athens. Instead, initiative and control are often in the hands of the police. Demonstrations of various types seem ineffective and meaningless. Recently, only the wilder unplanned moments, such as those days in September after the murder of Pavlos Fyssas, recall some of the previous spirit.

There are many reasons why this could be. It is a fact that there have been fewer large scale demonstrations in recent years. Of course when in 2008-2012 demonstrations numbered 100-200,000 people the situation was different than in 2012-2014 when demonstrations rarely pass 10-15,000 at most. This itself could be due to a drop in morale, despair, or a sign of a population tired of the visibly ineffective forms of opposition offered by the old 'left'. Whilst these are important factors, another important part is the role of the police and a change in their tactics.

The drive for Greece to become more like its Northern European neighbours is also being carried out in the police force. From the perspective of Northern Europe where the police force often has, and exercises, complete control on the streets, the situation in Greece, with frequent riots and violent demonstrations, seems somewhat odd. In recent years the Greek force has become much more organised in its approach to protests. This, coupled with a license to deal with protesters much more harshly, is changing the situation on the Greek streets.

February 12th 2012: The unelected Papademos government prepares to put another set of austerity measures to the vote. A three day General Strike is called, leading up to the vote on the measures in parliament. As the vote is passed, the demonstration outside turns into a riot. All around the centre of Athens (and other cities) banks, shops and everything is burned. Rather than being confined to a small area, as before, the destruction in Athens is the most widespread and the most extensive of the anti-austerity riots.

If we look at a few examples in recent years we can see a shift in tactics. My first example is the General Strike of 26th September 2012, the first large demonstration after the usual summer lull and the May/June elections of that year. As usual, the crowd was roughly 100,000 and proceeded as normal to Syntagma Square. Once the main body of the demonstration reached Syntagma and clashes started, the MAT launched



a series of attacks which broke up the large body of the demonstration and cleared the square quickly. The police then continued to attack along Panepistimio street, not allowing any substantial blocs to reform. This was followed up by DIAS attacks on Omonia Square which forced any remaining people to flee to the metro. The result was that the first major demonstration since February 12th was cleared and dispersed in little over half an hour.

The police deployment was such that they were able to cut the body of the demonstration into smaller pieces and not allow it to stay in Syntagma Square. In addition, and in contrast to previous days, no time or space was given for scattered groups to reform (the current routine of the forced closure of metro stations in the area perhaps plays a part here).

Other large scale demonstrations have followed a similar pattern, with the heavy rain being an additional factor in the November 6th-7th 2012 mobilisations. By late 2013 the General Strike demonstrations had become simple marches from one point to another with police control of Syntagma Square rarely contested. We have gone from a situation where large General Strike demonstrations turned into open and participatory riots to them simply being dispiriting A to B marches.

MAT: The Greek police riot units. Often heavily armoured with leg and arm guards, helmets, rectangular shields and heavy boots. In equipment they distinctly resemble ancient Roman soldiers.

DIAS and DELTA: Mobile units on motorbikes. Armoured like the MAT but without the shields, they sit two to a bike. Despite the ridiculous sight of two guys weighed down with armour and weapons hugging each other on an overburdened bike, they are ruthless thugs.

If we skip forward to late 2013 on November 17th we saw the police contain and shepherd the traditional march throughout its length. The police remained in constant contact with the demonstration, not allowing any space or time away from the fixed route. Once people reached Exarchia

they were given a taste of the new tactical approach of the police. Within minutes of minor clashes starting the police invaded the neighbourhood with both MAT and DIAS units rampaging around. As we would see again less than a month later the days of standing off and trading tear gas for stones are gone.

The clearest example of the current situation so far was 6th December 2013. Early in the day we saw the first example of kettling in Greece when hundreds of people were arbitrarily surrounded by lines of MAT on the steps of the Propyleia. This incident with its adoption of a new tactic would seem to suggest that the Greek police forces are implementing new techniques learned via inter-European training. Later in the evening after the main demonstration finished and people gathered in the centre of Exarchia the police launched a concentrated and continuous attack throughout the night.

As with November 17th there were none of the previous attempts at minimal restraint by the police. The neighbourhood was surrounded by lines of MAT with DIAS units circling around. The main attack cleared people from the central square early on and then for the next hours any attempt to concentrate in a group met with swift attacks. I believe what we saw on November 17th and December 6th was something different from the traditional police tactic of containment. In previous years it seemed the police were happy to allow people to stay in Exarchia and let them riot for sometime before eventually closing things down. Now in addition to the traditional containment, an element of suppression has been added. No longer are skirmishes and clashes allowed to run on; they are stamped out immediately with exemplary force.

Kettling: A police tactic used in several countries. The idea is to surround an uncooperative group of people with several lines of police. Once the police lines are in place the people surrounded will be contained, often for many hours, in a state of de facto arrest. Sometimes the police will seek to arrest all within the kettle and other times just release people a few at a time.

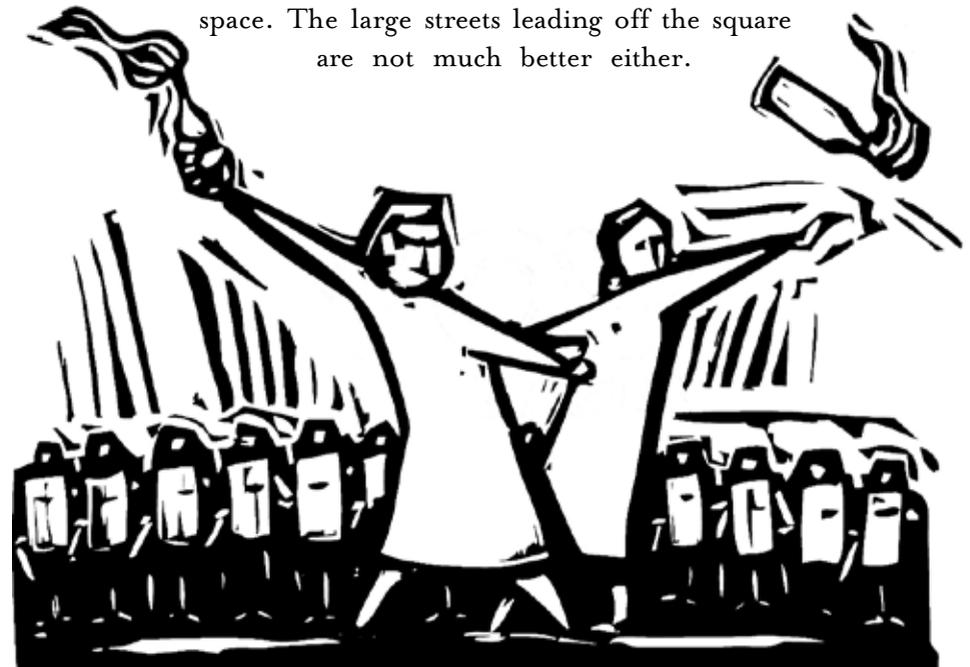
We have also recently seen an increase in the banning of protests. Several times now the government has banned demonstrations at certain times and places. Citing security reasons large parts of the city centres are sealed off by riot police. Recent examples include the Ecofin protest and the second visit of Angela Merkel in April 2014. On both occasions Syntagma was completely closed off by riot police as demonstrations were banned. Protests still went ahead but could do nothing more than crawl down one street before turning around and going home when the wall of cops was reached.

From these examples and more we can see that police tactics have changed since 2012. They seek much more to contain and neutralise demonstrations and, when deemed necessary, crush any further resistance. If Greece is to become more like Northern Europe then perhaps it is worthwhile for us to look at how people there (and elsewhere) respond to an organised police force at demonstrations. First, I'd like to look at what could be done in and around demonstrations. Later, I'll move on to ideas outside of the traditional demonstration march.

We have allowed demonstrations to fall into a familiar pattern in the last few years with most following a set route (General Strikes: assembly at Mouseio, down Stadiou through Syntagma back up Panepistimio and home by 3:30). This predictability firstly makes the demonstrations boring verging on pointless and second makes it easy for the police to control the situation. By keeping demonstrations on set routes it limits the disruption caused and reduces the visibility of the struggle. The police 'win' a situation when normality returns. We 'win' by keeping a resisting presence and space. To do this we need some more spontaneity and to include as much of the city as possible in actions.

We could start to do this before demonstrations begin. A variety of assembly points spread across the centre of the city instead of the one anarchist/anti-authoritarian gathering point would include more of the city and spread police resources. Each gathering point would, however, have to be organised well enough to assemble sufficient people to deter preventative arrests. From these various points feeder marches can then head into the city centre or indeed anywhere else. In this way the same number of people would disrupt a larger part of the city and come into contact with more people.

Another question is the one of destination. There is obvious logic in heading to Syntagma Square. It is a large open space which allows many thousands of people to be in one place and of course the parliament looms above. However, as a destination/battlefield the open spaces of Syntagma are a major disadvantage. The police are now very efficient at controlling and removing people from the square. Besides, tear gas makes it difficult to remain in one place and with the MAT being a heavily armed organised force it will always have the advantage when facing disorganised numbers in an open space. The large streets leading off the square are not much better either.



The reason Haussman cut large open streets through Paris still applies. If we were to seek a way to keep demonstrations from effectively ending at Syntagma we just need to stop thinking of the parliament as a destination.

Instead of seeing Syntagma as the end point there are plenty of other nearby destinations: Ermou street, one of the busiest commercial areas in the city, Plaka/Monastiraki in the heart of Athens, the idyllic haven for the economically vital tourists, or even rich and shiny Kolonaki. All are a short walk from Syntagma. Breaking off from the old familiar route in any of these directions would create a different situation. In addition, all these areas are made up mainly of small narrow streets which would be more advantageous than the open spaces of Syntagma and Panepistimio.

The other end point of demonstrations, Exarchia, also needs some consideration. Going to Exarchia, whether with the conscious idea of rioting or not, makes some sense but also has its problems. It is a neighbourhood of small streets which lead out to various parts of the city and is a kind of geographical hub for the movement in Athens. The drawback is that we can easily become trapped in Exarchia and cut off from the rest of the city as we saw on December 6th. Staying or retreating to one area can put us under siege, a siege we often walk into. Another way to think about this is to say that we should be offering something new and different to society. A riot in Exarchia is by now just another Greek tradition. As with all traditions it is one which gives us a sense of who we are but also holds us back at the same time.

In considering the location of demonstrations we should also think about our movements as the march is under way. In the UK protest blocs routinely change direction and move randomly as opportunity dictates in order to avoid the

police. This started as a tactical response to kettling. In order to avoid being surrounded and immobilised, protesters leave the march route as soon as the police are seen to be forming a line in order to kettle those present. If the aim is merely to avoid the police, not so much organisation is needed so long as the idea is there. If a group has a specific destination or target in mind then these marches require some planning so that the best route can be taken to get where you want.

On March 26th 2011 a large anti-austerity demonstration was held in London. The radical blocs kept moving constantly to avoid being kettled and to break out of the set route for the demonstration. Whilst blocs kept moving they reconvened at one location at a set time in order to support a symbolic occupation organised by the UK Uncut activist group along Oxford Street. The actual target of the occupation was unknown to the majority in the blocs which meant it managed to remain secret from police. However, the simple instruction to gather at Oxford Street at a set time was enough for the symbolic action to go ahead with some support.

The effect of this could be seen during the 2010-11 student protests in the UK. Large blocs evaded the police who were slow to respond to fast moving groups. The result was a series of demonstrations which briefly enlivened the British scene. For the more militant minded this practice offers the possibility of moving away from police concentrations to find less defended areas to target. A group can then inflict whatever damage possible on targets before quickly moving off somewhere else.

Of course, there are differences with the Greek situation. British police are often not so casually and routinely aggressive as their Greek counterparts. During 2010-11 British police would wait for an opportunity to encircle protesters again once they

had slipped through the net, whereas the MAT would likely just attack. Despite the traditional attachment to horse cavalry the British forces don't have the mobility offered by DIAS. So the response would be different in Greece, but this does not mean it could not work. There is, perhaps also a further difference in the attitude of those protesting. For many, a large part of the British practice is to avoid the police and continue with whatever protest or action is planned. Often in Greece a confrontation with the police seems to be the main objective.

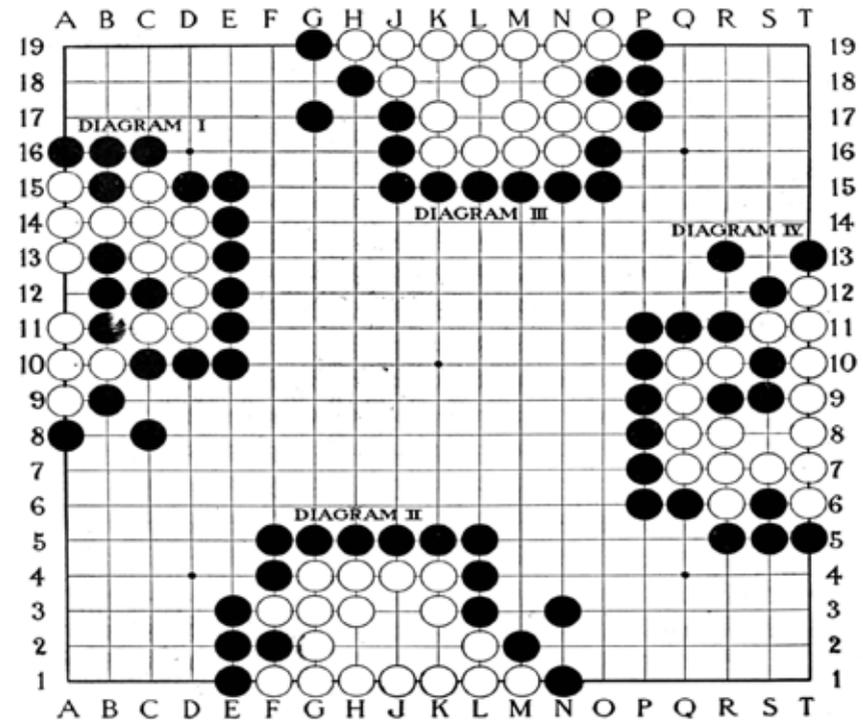
What I've talked about here isn't really anything new. After all, February 12th 2012 was significant because the events were spread widely over the centre of Athens, thus diverting police attention in several directions at once. All we need to think of is ways to create this spread of events on a regular basis.

Carrying out the actions mentioned above and those to follow could be made much easier if people increasingly organise on the basis of affinity groups. Such groups are based on a small number of people with similar attitudes and abilities who can plan and carry out actions on their own. Often based on friendship circles or people who spend a large amount of time together affinity groups at best can be secure, creative and resilient.

A bloc of several hundred people who follow a banner as a single mass or organisation are immobile and limited, as everyone has to follow the same plan even if they are unaware what that is. In contrast, affinity groups, whilst still taking part in a large bloc, retain their own autonomy. The same number of people organised into affinity groups would be capable of much more than a mass of individuals. From a bloc, affinity groups could spread out to attack targets of opportunity or

carry out a multitude of small-scale actions. From the point of view of defence, affinity groups have an advantage. A large bloc can get scattered in different directions by police attacks and if people are unable to regather again in a mass the bloc is destroyed. Affinity groups allow people to stay together as a meaningful unit with its own plans which they can either still carry out or retreat in safety.

Breaking with the idea of staying on the traditional demonstration routes and changing the organisation of blocs would make the police's attempts at control and containment more difficult. There are also other ideas beyond the organisation of demonstrations which may be of some use to us in the current situation.



At the end of 2013 and start of 2014 Golden Dawn held two large rallies in the centre of Athens. On both occasions counter-demos were called but both were ineffective. On February 1st the police cleared anti-fascists from Syntagma Square to allow Golden Dawn to march unopposed. The previous month a number of counter-demos were unable to do anything to disrupt another Golden Dawn Syntagma rally. Those gathered in Monastiraki were able to do nothing more than stand around in the drizzle occasionally seizing on a passing 'fascist', cop or even each other.

These counter-demos followed a similar pattern to that seen in other countries. Whilst the gatherings are important to create an anti-fascist presence, a public demonstration will not be able to directly confront fascism. Once they gather, fascists and their supporters will be under police protection. However, they must first get to their rally point. Focusing attention on places where groups gather or use transport has been effective in other countries. In 2010 around 12,000 people blockaded the largest gathering of European Neo-Nazis in Dresden. The train station used to arrive in the city was the point blockaded, not the rally site itself. Despite police attempts to protect the Neo-Nazi march it was eventually called off.



It should also be noted that this action was the result of an alliance of groups opposed to the march and was carried out with a diversity of tactics.

Whilst speaking of anti-fascist activities we should highlight a positive development of the kind we are talking about here. A practical action we have seen in recent years is the Antifa Motoporeias—large motorbike patrols which periodically sweep through areas of fascist activity. The Motoporeias answer a real direct need of the neighbourhoods in which they are active and provide a challenge to the fascist/police dominance on the streets. This goes beyond a demonstration which aims at gathering public support and moves instead to provide support to the public.

One positive thing of even the most boring protest march is that the streets it passes are closed, bringing about a little economic disruption. We should look to expand on this. Blocking roads and communication in urban centres would have an economic impact and break the circulation of normality. As well as being a tactic which offers a direct attack on capital in a way which a demonstration does not, blockades can also be used against specific targets. At times when the target of a demonstration will be heavily defended, a meeting of EU ministers, EU leader visit or fascist march, the best time to disrupt the target is at a distance from its final destination.

If we look at blockades as a tactic, in Greece we have the example of Keratea and Skouries, and elsewhere there were the Piqueteros of Argentina. Using wood, tyres, fuel, or anything else, people blocked major roads and national highways throughout Argentina. Once the roads were blocked the space could be used for setting up mobile kitchens or just general demonstrating. As they themselves said:

“We see that the way capitalism operates is through the circulation of goods. Obstructing the highways is the way to hurt capitalism the most.”

Many of those manning the blockades were often unemployed. With no job to strike from they found their own way to hit capitalism. In one widespread example in August 2001, over 300 highways were blocked by around 100,000 people. Incidentally 100,000 is a normal figure for those taking part in General Strike demonstrations in Athens. One thing to note is that the Piqueteros were able to operate because they had some local support. The roads they blocked were often in or close to poor neighbourhoods which made the police reluctant to intervene in full force lest they stir a reaction from the sympathetic inhabitants nearby. Should there not be similar areas of Greece for this kind of action, perhaps it could be tried at a large demo where there will be a crowd of sympathetic people. Holding roads and preventing the smooth flow through the city would do more harm to capital than going for a walk and shouting at an old building.

Another example to bring in here is the 'Schottern' tactic used in Germany. Schottern involves removing the stones from under the railway lines to prevent it being used. The Castor Schottern event in 2010 involved groups of people engaging in the tactic whilst others, both activists and locals, organised other blockades and protests along a railway leading to a nuclear waste facility. Affinity groups went along the lines removing the stones and disrupting the train. Partly because they were dispersed over a wide area and with the presence of supporting protests, people were able to delay a nuclear waste transport for 24 hours despite the presence of 16,000 police.

Schottern: A new tactic used at blockades and protests against the transport of nuclear waste. Schotter (noun) are the small ballast stones beneath railway lines. Schottern (verb) is the act of removing the stones to render the railway unusable. It requires a lot of time and a special train to repair the lines after the stones have been removed. Often the railway lines themselves have to be replaced as they have been broken or bent.

It is also worth noting that in the modern world communication and movement are often not just physical. The economy also needs to maintain its electronic flows. TV and radio signals, phone and computer networks. These are some of the modern roads of capital and whilst they can't be seen, they have physical parts which can be sabotaged and disrupted. The same goes for anything online. As we have seen many times in recent years, denial of service and hacking can be forms of sabotage in the digital world.

What I have been driving at here is the idea that we should think away from the controlled protest for our actions. Small groups of people acting quickly with the element of surprise can often achieve more than thousands on a public protest. For example a few days after thousands of people spent the night being attacked and chased on 6th December, a few dozen people got together unannounced and launched an attack on the Exarchia police station before disappearing. A small group attacking spontaneously were able to do more than the thousands who gathered days before.



Of course this kind of thing happens all the time already. Another notable example from Greece are the supermarket expropriations. One such recent act in Athens saw a group of people enter a supermarket, take some food and supplies and give them to local people in need. Such small actions show the utility of affinity-group style organising. An increase in such organising could lead to a multiplying of small scale but constant actions. If people saw the urban environment as a constant site of attack and protest there is little police forces could do to control that.

To face increasing control and regulation we need spontaneity and a break with some of the traditional forms of protest. People within the anarchist movement do not expect that public demonstrations will change the world. Since a demonstration is an act of asking for something, they are indirect actions which still recognise the state. The anarchist tradition is to act for ourselves through direct action. Whilst demonstrations retain an importance as public performance, we are in danger of becoming a passive part in these performances.

When speaking to people about the future in Greece the most common thing to hear is 'we will wait and see what happens'. This state of waiting seems to pervade much of life in Greece these past years. It has also seeped into the anarchist movement. It's high time this period of waiting is brought to a close. The old 'left' with its symbolic (and shambolic) General Strikes and tired dead end parliamentary parties has gone as far as it can. To break the current deadlock people need to move beyond old constraints. The state knows this, hence the police's new efforts at organisation and control. An active and creative Anarchism with its tradition of direct action would be a new element in the mix and open new possibilities. However, should we continue to wait, the world will change around us, we will not be changing it.

