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‘movement of the piazzas’ Spontaneity in material and virtual public spaces
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Mediterranean cities are carrying Gramsci’s concept of spontaneity into the 21st century through massive social movements after the ‘Arab Spring’. This paper explores the ways in which the material and virtual cityscape interact with socio-political transformation during the ‘movement of the piazzas’ in Athens, Greece. After a discussion of the importance of urban informality, porosity and land-use mixtures for social cohesion, of creeping ghettoization in some enclaves and of the perils of urbicide, we proceed to an analysis of grassroots action in Athens in comparison with different cities of the Mediterranean and beyond. Social movements are placed in their respective local and global context—their recurrent material landscapes and their cosmopolitan virtual spaces of digital interaction. This analysis leads to reflections on the possible role of popular spontaneity in democratization and in European integration at the grassroots level, against the onslaught of neoliberalism and accumulation by dispossession.

Key words: social movements, Gramsci, hegemony, spontaneity, democracy, agora, Arab spring, Europe, Greece, crisis

Spontaneity has built Mediterranean cities, their popular suburbs and their kaleidoscopic landscapes; but then it was curbed by governments, especially during the period of South European dictatorships until the mid-1970s (Leontidou, 2006b [1990]). In this paper, we will reflect on the re-emergence of popular unmediated action on another level, borrowing Gramsci’s concept again, as he defines it vis-à-vis conscious leadership:

‘The term “spontaneity” can be variously defined, for the phenomenon to which it refers is many-sided. Meanwhile it must be stressed that “pure” spontaneity does not exist in history [...] In the “most spontaneous” movement it is simply the case that the elements of “conscious leadership” cannot be checked, have left no reliable document. It may be said that spontaneity is therefore characteristic of the “history of the subaltern classes” …’ (1971, p. 196)

In the past, we have used ‘spontaneity’ heuristically, to understand Mediterranean urban development in the 20th century (Leontidou, 1990). Its relevance is more literal now, at the wake of new social movements (NSMs), the ‘Arab Spring’ and the ‘movement of the piazzas’. Gramsci’s concept of hegemony has been used widely—as counter-hegemony in this
paper—but in addition his analysis of popular spontaneity is important in understanding Mediterranean urban movements and survival strategies today.

The concept is not very welcome in Greece and was criticized by Manolis Glezos, one of the most celebrated figures of the Left. He argued during his speech in Syntagma in June 2011 that the ‘movement of the piazzas’ is conscious and therefore not spontaneous (cf. also Sotiris, 2011, p. 165). Glezos seems to perceive spontaneity as referring to sudden upheavals rather than conscious movements. However, Gramsci spoke of spontaneous movements, not upheavals, and did not preclude the consciousness or awareness of the grassroots when spontaneously mobilizing. Gramsci’s distinction between spontaneity and conscious leadership echoes recent events in the Mediterranean, where, as Filiu (2011, p. 57) puts it, ‘Leaderless movements can win.’ They can indeed, in the ‘Arab Spring’, not yet in Greece; but we will argue that here, too, spontaneous movements are emerging, which defy leaders, traditional political parties and trade unions and seek direct democracy. As for grassroots survival strategies, they supersede intermediaries in exchange and production, forming alternative networks of direct exchange between producers and consumers via the Internet. In this exploratory (and often self-reflexive) paper we will only focus on the ways Athens as a material and virtual cityscape hosts spontaneous social movements and is transformed in the process. We will place it within a series of comparisons of grassroots action and digital interaction in different cities.

1. The Athens cityscape: mixtures and social divisions

There are quite a few misconceptions about urban development in Athens. This city has been traditionally mixed and porose—a palimpsest where land uses and activities, as well as spaces of social groups and classes, have interpenetrated each other. In an east-west divide of social classes, the working class has been living in western and peripheral spontaneous settlements since the interwar period (Leontidou, 1990) and the upper and middle classes in a sector reaching from the south-west to the north-east. The cityscape is marked by the inverse-Burgess model, clustering rather than strict segregation, informality and a tradition of semi-squatting in peripheral settlements. This is just the opposite of the ordered and easily decipherable unequal urban landscape of the Anglo-American city. Moreover, nothing like the American ghetto has emerged in Athens. Porosity, spontaneity, informal housing, small property ownership, but also the employment linkage, have created a mixture of activities and the vertical differentiation of groups and classes rather than neighbourhood segregation (Leontidou, 1990; Arapoglou and Sayas, 2009). In this, Gramsci has offered valuable insights, discussing aspects of civil society in the high-rise tenements of Naples:

‘On the ground floor of these palaces and tenements are found the famous bassi in which the poorer families live; the upper classes inhabit the upper floors of the same buildings. This cohabitation accounts for the ideological unity of all social groups in these zones which many observers have commented on.’

Gramsci (1949, pp. 95–96) was the first to comment on this ideological unity and to stress the spatial impact of vertical differentiation in the creation of social cohesion. Athens, too, has not automatically excluded or alienated ethnic minorities from particular areas for quite a long period. During the 21st century, however, vertical differentiation has become perhaps the tragedy of Athens, with ethnic hatred rising. Now neighbouring groups live in tension in certain inner-city enclaves. The ‘triangle’ of the city core is a no-go area for urban residents and tourists.
It has fallen into the hands of destitutes and smugglers, territorialities of gangs and ethnic groups, which are chased away by the police before election periods. To its north, in the piazza of Agios Panteleimon, hardly any tensions emerged between foreigners and native Athenians until the extreme Right invaded the area, started to clash with ethnic groups, and found fertile ground for the rejection of migrants (Kavoulakos and Kandylis, 2012). Now the neighbourhood is constantly tortured by an everyday civil war erupting in the piazza and on doorsteps.

As the debt crisis deepens and impoverishment hits Athens, the city is transformed with emergent ghettoization trends in some enclaves. The urban core is dilapidating by closures, destruction, arson, urbicide, as well as criminality and the concentration of destitutes. Is this the standard process of purposeful dilapidation of the inner city to cause depreciation and low prices for the sell out to entrepreneurs, who will ensure huge profits from organized development and gentrification? A relevant research project is long overdue. This may well be the possible fate of the Athens centre, but also of former Olympic sites. The dramatic 12 February 2012 arson attacks on historic buildings, described below, have destroyed the area exactly next to the dilapidated sections of the city core. This kind of urbicide may well not be a random event. Arson attacks expanded the area eligible for real estate speculation by opening further valuable central plots to decay to be followed by ‘organized’ redevelopment. Contrary to any effort of restoration of the burnt section of the city, a few weeks later the government announced that its plan to pedestrianize the central Panepistimiou Avenue, adjacent to the decaying centre, will be realized instead. This can be hardly called ‘gentrification’, given the good condition of the avenue. It raises important questions as to the function, timing and location of this intervention, next to the burnt and decaying sections of the inner city, which are left to decline. Public funds are allocated to the pedestrianization, leaving private interests to profit from the gentrification of the dilapidated inner city adjoining Panepistimiou Avenue.

Arson, violence and urbicide have often occurred in Athens since the 2004 Olympics. Peaceful demonstrations are systematically interrupted by violence: attacks with chemicals and brutality of the riot police (MAT) follow or precede demolitions, arson and looting by youths in hoods, the proverbial ‘koukouloforoi’, who after 2008 have been called ‘bahalakides’ (the ones creating havoc) and are not always acting spontaneously. Some of them are angry young anarchists, some hooligans, while in some other cases there have been allegations and photos of provocateurs who infiltrate peaceful demonstrations to scare off citizens and to give pretexts to the riot police to unleash violence against the crowds of protesters. In fact, though spontaneity may emancipate people and make a success of movements without leaders (Filiu, 2011), it may also sometimes breed monsters. Gramsci again stressed the importance of spontaneity in politics, but also reflected on its vulnerability and prompted activists not to despise it:

‘Neglecting, or worse still despising, so-called “spontaneous” movements, i.e. failing to give them a conscious leadership or to raise them to a higher plane by inserting them into politics, may often have extremely serious consequences. It is almost always the case that a “spontaneous” movement of the subaltern classes is accompanied by a reactionary movement of the right-wing of the dominant class, for concomitant reasons.’ (1971, p. 199)

Gramsci here draws attention to the importance of the margins of capitalist modernity and cautions against their political manipulation. He affirms spontaneity, but also proposes to raise it to a higher plane politically, with the help of leadership, in order to prevent its absorption by right-wing forces. In light of his experience of the rise of fascism in Italy in his own time, this question was painfully relevant. Remarkably, this is
also the case for the rest of Europe in the 21st century. As we were thinking that the recurring experience of dictatorships in Southern Europe until the 1970s was behind us, we are suddenly witnessing in 2011 the appointment of extra-parliamentary bankers (with a past in Goldman Sachs), simultaneously, as prime ministers in Greece and Italy, and then the ascent of the extreme Right in the Greek elections of 6 May 2012.

Urbicide is only one part of the story, overemphasized by media and attributed to ‘anarchists’. There are also massive peaceful movements of hundreds of thousands of people, inscribed into the kaleidoscopic Athenian landscape, which is the city’s power and its peril. As porose and mixed as Athens is, with all the risks involved therein, so are its public spaces, the multi-activity and hybrid piazzas.

We do insist on ‘piazzas’ rather than ‘squares’ in order to denote the open and the nodal centre of material and virtual communication rather than an enclosed square and its defined landscape. It is worth staying a little longer at certain contrasting uses of urban public space in European cities. Mixed land use, informality and street life in the South create the particular species of the piazza, where open-air living and complex activities take place. Political upheaval brought these public spaces close to the ancient Greek agora. This was a complex space between the oikos, the private house, and the ecclesia, the public parliament (Bauman, 2011). It was a space between the individual and the State, where civil society emerged, and which was passed to the Roman forum (Canniffe, 2008). Agora literally meant marketplace where commerce was centred, but it was actually a public space of leisure and consumption, shopping and workshops, small parks and kiosks, as well as encounter and communication, but also of participation, a place where citizenship was forged, where the whole urban community was centred (Leontidou, 2009).

This agora of classic antiquity, this politically charged public space of political participation, discussion and debate, returned to Athens during the ‘movement of the piazzas’ in 2011, when the urban piazzas opened up to the popular assemblies for discussion and interaction, as we shall soon see. The active ‘public’ realm open to political participation (Leontidou, 2009; Bauman, 2011) was revived. Back in previous centuries, the ‘public’ existed as a ‘purely spiritual collectivity, as a dissemination of physically separated individuals whose cohesion is entirely mental’ (Tarde cited in Laclau, 2005, p. 44). Publics emerged with the invention of the printing press in the 16th century, but now they acquire new force, vitality and indeed reality in the material piazzas and in the virtual spaces of the Internet, that is, in local and global public spaces, as discussed below.

2. The movement of the piazzas

Mapping urban landscapes and piazzas of insurrections is important in understanding the role of the urban landscape and the recurrent spatialities in political transitions. Certain piazzas and urban public places have come to be the recurrent locations of mobilizations through time. The most familiar long-lasting example is Paris. The barricades of the 1871 Commune, those against the Germans in 1944 and those of the French May of 1968 were erected in exactly the same places in the city, in the Quartier Latin (Hobsbawm, 1968; Leontidou, 2006a; cf. also Harvey, 2003b). This can even be carried further, to the 21st century and another May, that of the year 2005, when insurrections started massively from the peripheral banlieu and then, by impressively rapid digital interaction, exploded in all cities of France, as well as in the centre of Paris: the suburban population demonstrated together with students again on the north-east of the Luxemburg Gardens and the Sorbonne, at the Quartier Latin, while violent conflicts extended to the Place des Invalides in the spring of 2006 (Leontidou, 2006a).
In fact, no matter how cities are restructured and technology changes and resurrections differ, material spaces are often recurrent: the same spaces are used for different political activities through time. This is not premeditated by revolutionaries (Hobsbawm, 1968; Leontidou, 2006a). It is rather spontaneous, a response perhaps to combinations of spatial symbolism, urban layout with respect to protection and effectiveness, centrality and land use. However, spatial recurrence has to be kept apart from comparisons among movements taking place in these spaces. Activists love comparing, as it seems and as we will now show, starting from Figure 1, where Athens in 2011 is compared with Paris in 1968.

The tendency of certain authors to compare revolts in Athens in December 1944 and December 2008 gives us an opportunity for a conceptual clarification of political cultures before and after the fall of the Berlin wall. The ‘Dekemvriana’ of 3 December 1944 in Athens, that bloody Sunday with so many communists killed, belongs to a different era. The communists of the early 20th century, Europe’s ‘others’ and USA’s ‘threat’, are no longer the vanguard of social protest in the post-socialist world. The Greek civil war in the mid-1940s is worlds apart from the current protest movements—their class composition and their quest for direct democracy beyond the party system. After 1989, NSMs (Tarrow, 2006; Leontidou, 2010) are crystallized in the consumer society and digital communication, raising issues of identity, globalization, exploitation and dispossession, very different from class conflict in the period of producers in our industrial past.

The sharp difference of NSMs from cold war politics cannot be overestimated in the case of Greece. The country has seen several social splits and dualisms, ‘dihasmous’, but in these ones, December 1944 and 2008, the only coincidence (besides the month) has been spatial. Clashes in 1944 exploded in the same city, Athens, and in the same piazza, Syntagma, where the December 2008 clashes took place—though starting from Exarcheia—and where the indignant citizens gathered in 2011. Syntagma is in fact not the self-evident piazza, because Athens’ city centre is bifocal: there is also Omonia Square as a possible alternative. However, it has always been Syntagma, which concentrated mass rallies and shaped Greek politics, the focal public space with the Parliament buildings (the former palace). It hosted two Decembers, the one which ignited the civil war and the other which marked the beginning of massive movements for direct democracy, politicizing grassroots protest against accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2003a), as the debt crisis has been deepening.

December 2008 diverges sharply from movements of the cold war. Like many other new movements of revolt around the world, it started from an incident of police brutality. On 6 December 2008, the police shot the teenager Alexis Grigoropoulos. This triggered a massive protest from the centre of the neighbourhood of Exarcheia, and urban violence spread throughout the city, snowballing with digital communication (Economides and Monastiriotis eds 2009; Vradis and Dalakoglou eds 2011).

Exarcheia presents yet another case of spatial recurrence hosting socio-political difference. This area around the

Figure 1 Banner posted in Syntagma by the Théâtre de Soleil on 18 June 2011 to celebrate solidarity between Athens and Paris (Photo: L. Leontidou).
Polytechnio (National Technical University, Athens) was also the place of the student revolt of 1973, which brought down the junta. Then it became the traditional hub of rebels and occasional uprisings (Bratsis, 2010; Mentinis, 2010; Petropoulou, 2010; Sotiris, 2010; Vradis and Dalakoglou, 2011). The change of regime in the 1970s, called ‘metapolitefsi’, was the beginning of democracy, or rather the democratic deficit and leadership gap, merged with clientelism, which are still torturing Greece at present. This has been well understood by the activists of December 2008 and was explicitly phrased in slogans such as ‘do away with the “generation of metapolitefsi”’, which is at present selling out the country with the financial crisis as a pretext (Giovanopoulos and Dalakoglou, 2011). In 2011, the dominant rhyming motto of the Athens ‘aganaktismenoi’ (indignant citizens), chanted and written on panels in Syntagma Square, is a masterpiece of inventive intertextuality. It starts with an anti-dictatorial slogan of the 1970s and then attacks the generation that inspired it: ‘Bread, Education, Freedom. The junta did not end in 1973. We ourselves will bury it in this piazza’ (see Figure 2).

Social movements in Athens have been occasionally compared with Anglo-American movements (Vradis and Dalakoglou, 2011): LA in 1992, Northern England in 2001 and London in 2011. One similarity consists of police brutality preceding these events: most recently, the shootings of Alexis Grigoropoulos in Athens, 2008, and Mark Duggan in London, 2011 (Douzinas, 2011). However, these were very different youths: a middle-class pupil in Athens did not awaken anti-racist sentiments and racial tension like ethnic minorities assaulted in London in August 2011, as well as LA in 1992 and Northern England in 2001. In this, Anglo-American riots seem more similar with those of the Paris banlieue in 2005, where minorities revolted and triggered violent conflicts for four months. However, the strong element of protest against racism was here succeeded by solidarity in spring 2006, when the banlieue residents came to the centre of Paris to demonstrate together with students. Victory was celebrated on 11 April 2006, ironically, with dances around the Arc de Triomphe (Leontidou, 2006a).

By contrast, the shooting of Alexis in Athens 2008, which ended up in urbicide, did not raise an ethnic question, but brought together a wide variety of youths abused by neoliberalism (Giovanopoulos and Dalakoglou, 2011). Youths against neoliberalism also trigger other movements, which are more appropriate to compare with Athens. These are all very recent and include European ones (UK, France, Italy), but also California and Chile (Sotiris, 2011, p. 159), and the Anglo-American Occupy movements; but a lot of space would be needed for all these comparisons, which are equally difficult with the ones discussed above.

The Athens December 2008 was not a ‘missed opportunity’ (Giovanopoulos and Dalakoglou, 2011, p. 112), since it had a series of positive and negative results. The latter have been overexposed by the media. The positive results have been underestimated, though they are possibly long lasting. Besides the uprising for the ‘right to the city’, opening up new sites of confrontation (Leontidou, 2010; Dalakoglou and

Figure 2 Banners with slogans, including the main one referring to 1973, in front of the Greek Parliament in Syntagma, Athens, June 2011 (Photo: L. Leontidou).
Vradis, 2011), longer term collectivities and solidarities emerged then. Wider Mediterranean social movements did not appear suddenly in 2011, but have been incubated over long periods of time in their respective weak civil societies (Leontidou, 2010). The Egyptian ones go back to at least 2005 (El Hamamsy, 2011). The Greek ones were incubated between frequent rallies after the 2004 Olympics (Afouxenidis, 2006) and cosmopolitan networks protesting against neoliberal globalization. Greeks kept taking part in NSMs and demonstrations against summit meetings (Tarrow, 2006; Routledge and Cumbers, 2009; Leontidou, 2010), where people and collectivities from several countries communicated digitally and travelled, in a way like flâneur activists (Leontidou, 2006b), demanding democratic globalization. For some years, digital activism and involvement in social networks by very young people strengthened activist centres and groups and their international networking. After December 2008 and austerity measures in subsequent years, protest movements became more massive. In fact, the bulky bibliography on new urban movements includes works that put Greece into the picture (Bratsis, 2010; Leontidou, 2006b, 2010; Mentinis, 2010; Petropoulou, 2010; Routledge, 2010; Sotiris, 2010; Vradis and Dalakoglou, 2011; Giovanopoulos and Mitropoulos, 2011).

The Greek ‘movement of the piazzas’ in Syntagma, Athens, seems to have been incubated in the new century and to have its roots in cosmopolitan networks, as well as the violence of previous uprisings since December 2008; but it was peaceful. It was initially thought to imitate the indignados of Spain,
but grew to be enormous and lasted for over two months, from 25 May 2011 until 30 July, when the police ‘cleared’ the piazza of tents and equipment—or rather, destroyed them. The number of previously ‘invisible’ citizens (Douzinas, 2011), who either peacefully occupied or passed regularly from Syntagma to protest, is difficult to calculate, but could have been 2.6 million (Sotiris, 2011, p. 157). Indignant citizens also filled several other neighbourhood squares in Athens, surrounded the White Tower in Thessaloniki, occupied many provincial piazzas and forged an unprecedented counter-hegemonic movement (Douzinas, 2011; Giovanopoulos and Mitropoulos, 2011).

Syntagma became for two months a mixed-use hybrid space, an agora, a ‘public’ realm. Direct democracy was cultivated during those unforgettable days and nights of the 2011 occupation, a time of cultural events, alternative activities, concerts, solidarity performances by Tiger Lillies, Théâtre de Soleil (see Figure 3) and so many other Europeans, and of course popular assemblies in Syntagma Square. There was a duality in the piazza: the ‘upper piazza’ in front of the Parliament (see Figure 4) concentrated people with rough tactics of anger, pragmatists or others with wide varieties of political affiliations and different political imagination than those in the ‘lower piazza’. The latter was occupied by progressive people closer to the Left (see Figure 5), who debated the preconditions of direct democracy and organized for self-help, mutual aid, solidarity and collective action. The centre of Syntagma was occupied by two of the several thematic, support and work groups, the important Communication/Multimedia group and the Health group with doctors active during every police assault.

The two Syntagmas merged, as most people passed through both piazzas every night and expressed common reflections on the corruption of political parties, the exploitative nature of neoliberalism and the debt crisis, the importance of independent social movements. There was thus solidarity, synergy, and an aversion to political parties and traditional trade unions. Party representatives were not allowed as such in the popular assemblies of lower Syntagma. They could only speak as individuals in an assembly where random numbers were allocated to all people and lots were drawn so as to call speakers to the podium. The agora, as defined above, was thus revived in the ‘lower piazza’, where processes of direct democracy included the random selection of speakers to the popular assembly. Direct democracy was actively sought and spontaneity was chosen, over and above representative democracy and conscious leadership.
3. Virtual public spaces

Many of the movements discussed above belong to a genre of social movements originating in popular outbursts responding to local events—police brutality or suicides with a political essence—, which spread rapidly through digital communication to involve massive waves of protest, up to the urban and maybe the global level. In 2011, the two strands, i.e. events igniting local grassroots protest and global social movements, met spectacularly in the ‘Arab Spring’. The event of M. Bouazizi’s self-immolation in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, was reported widely via social media and sparked social protest, which snowballed throughout the Mediterranean (Filiu, 2011; El Hamamsy, 2011). Digital interactions between Tunisia and Egypt have been established, as have those between Spain and Greece. What we do not know is the degree of interaction between the South and the North of the Mediterranean. The language barrier should not be underestimated. However, what we do know is the widespread use of digital social networks and the Internet. The ‘Arab Spring’ and the ‘movement of the piazzas’ were synchronous spontaneous uprisings that made social media as legendary as the piazzas of Cairo and those of the indignados of Madrid and Athens. The demonstration effect of Tunisian cities as pioneers ignited massive protests in Cairo’s Tahrir Square (Filiu, 2011; El Hamamsy, 2011). Puerta del Sol in Madrid, the movement of 12 March 2011 in Lisbon and Syntagma in Athens on 25 May 2011 followed. All these have transformed the respective capital cities and the whole of the Mediterranean urban network, and have affected cities at the global level.

‘Public spaces’ are therefore not only material and local, but virtual and global, too, in the cities of the 21st century. Spontaneous digital communication is driven by each individual but becomes collective or public, as spontaneous interaction among so many people escalates. Collectivities emerge that may be international, and crowds gather in the most unpredictable time-space occasions. All social movements in Mediterranean Europe and Africa took place in virtual as well as material public spaces, where people communicated directly and spontaneously via the Internet, including Web 2.0 and social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn and MySpace, etc. Also Web 1.0 applications, blogging and SMS have been used for quite some time now (Papadimitriou, 2006). Spontaneity comes naturally in the abstract spaces of social media, and must have inspired many of the slogans, not least the one for direct democracy. However, collectivities can only be formed in material spaces, where trust is forged: in person to person live communication in the piazzas but also, occasionally, in Internet cafes (Filiu, 2011) and in youth squats and social centres (Makrygianni and Tsavdaroglou, 2011, pp. 37–41).

The remarkable dynamics of digital activism and communication were evident in the instant gathering of people in the piazzas after every Internet call and in the coordination of their slogans; but also in the communication among cities. Syntagma in Athens was virtually linked with Madrid by Skype, and the two popular assemblies were in conversation in June 2011 (see Figure 6). Demonstrations around the world were organized through social media to coincide on the same days in different cities of the world, with the slogan ‘we are all Greek’: on 18 February and in early March 2012 (see Figure 7); throughout 2011, intellectuals in blogs, newspapers and journals (also this one; cf. Catterall, 2011a, 2011b) expressed solidarity and gave support with articles and sustained interest in the ‘movement of the piazzas’, at a period when the mainstream EU press stigmatized the Greeks in an often openly racist discourse (e.g. German magazines Focus, Bild, Spiegel, etc.). Artists gave solidarity performances in the piazzas and concrete support in blogs and YouTube.

Cyberspace is thought to create new human types and aspirations with sensivities about the footprint of freedom.
Digital interaction and influence came to have such significance in Mediterranean politics, that Hosni Mubarak was ousted from power while trying to manipulate the Internet (El Hamamsy, 2011). When he interfered with communications, people rushed to the streets to see what was happening, and Tahrir Square once again came alive. In Athens, the binary virtual/material reality was reversed by the government, which was trying to manipulate the material realm: the riot police were repeatedly unleashed against the people in the belief that chasing demonstrators away from their material spatial opportunities would dissolve the movement.

By August 2011, the police had destroyed all tents and were busy attacking every demonstration in the central piazza: Syntagma Square, the main spatial focus of the movement, was to be kept ‘clean’ by tear gas and assaults. It is remarkable (and lamentable) that on 12 February 2012 the whole riot police force was concentrated there to attack peaceful demonstrators, while the other part of central Athens was being burnt! (see Figure 8). This strategy of the re-establishment of fear is now considered effective by the Greek government. It was put into action from July 2011 and culminated after the suicide of D. Christoulas on 4 April 2012: the riot police was unleashed against demonstrators gathered to honour the retired pharmacist, who shot himself in the middle of Syntagma piazza. Tear gas, beating and kicking followed, which sent people to hospitals, including journalists and the president of the photo reporters’ union, M. Lolos, who underwent head surgery.

A constant effort by the Greek governments after the summer of 2011, is thus obviously to re-establish fear in those spaces where the ‘movement of the piazzas’ had dissolved fears and had forged trust, solidarity and hope. However, the grassroots movement survives in decentralized piazzas and other material places, as well as in the
virtual spaces of the Internet and the blogosphere. It has surfaced in the Greek elections of 6 May 2012, when Greece, and especially the cities, was swept by a vote to the Left, which may be repeated or even strengthened very soon. Time will tell.

4. Conclusive reflections

Several dualisms and couplets have emerged in this short paper: spontaneity vs. conscious leadership, material vs. virtual reality, local vs. global spaces, private vs. public realm; we spoke of collectivities and solidarities, but also of divisions and polarizations. Among the latter, we will now end with reflections on the North/South, or rather core/periphery, polarization within Europe as the material context of the ‘movement of the piazzas’. The re-emergence of neocolonialism in its neoliberal version in post-colonial Europe (Leontidou, 2012) cuts through the EU rhetoric and illusion and exposes the EU as an utopia: from an eutopia of unification and solidarity that never flowered, it is now turning into a dystopia of accumulation by dispossession. Social movements protest exactly against this failure.

Africans have to deal with autocracies. However, Europeans are also suffering from a democratic deficit. The debt crisis is a spectacle of spreads, hedge funds, rating agencies, ‘Troika’, politicians, virtual ‘saviours’ and Kafkaesque postponements of the punishment of the people (Douzinas, 2011). The crisis has reshuffled uneven development levels, economics, debts, livelihoods, but also social relations, incomes, employment opportunities, cultural identities, political participation. It has exposed the suppression of weak nations by the strong ones, accumulation by dispossession, the separation of power from parliamentary politics (Bauman, 2011), the leadership gap in the EU. National political figures are also insufficient or inert in this process and new leaders emerge, attempting to counter the sweep of neocolonialism. In the recent past, only few exceptional leaders have resisted neoliberalism, like the president of Iceland Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, who acted against what he called ‘the privatization of profit and the nationalization of loss’, repeatedly sending unjust laws to national referenda.

In other countries, however, national parliamentary inertia combined with the democratic deficit in the EU make a mockery of social cohesion, sustainability and several similar ‘euro-words’, which have now become vacant. The very word ‘solidarity’ has been recuperated by the Greek government to name a ‘special’ tax levied in the context of the overall social injustice of austerity measures. Recuperation has been a constant strategy, evident in the use of the Internet to present governance as transparent (opengov) or in naming a law ‘for participatory and direct democracy’ that concerns the use of referenda for the legitimation of governmental policies. Recuperation must be seen as an attempt by the Greek establishment at reproducing the symbiotic or ‘deferentially intertwined cultures’ prevalent in Greek society for so long (Afouxenidis, 2006).

In today’s post-colonial Europe we are watching, impotent, the reconstruction of the ‘European South’, worse than that found in Gramsci (Leontidou, 2012). The fierce neocolonial financial war between North and South includes all kinds of weapons besides military intervention: rating agencies, speculators and usurers who inflate interest rates but are never punished; stigmatization, open racism, accumulation by dispossession, tear gas and plastic bullets. The EU South is dispossessed, stigmatized by ‘other’ EU member states, victimized by neoliberalism, with a leadership vacuum.

Greece suffers from a process of accumulation by dispossession brought about by cruel neoliberal measures, which have no parliamentary legitimation. The Greeks have to bear with unscrupulous governments,10 politicians crudely dealing with the debt crisis according to orders from an EU–IMF–ECB ‘Troika’, but indifferent to rising unemployment levels and the brain drain caused by
the emigration of the young educated unemployed Greeks. These governments dismantled the already weak welfare state, destroyed the Workers’ Housing Organisation, health and education, and kept pumping out money from the poor to feed the banks, the usurers and the tax evaders who took much of the country’s wealth abroad. They also keep releasing the riot police with tear gas and other chemicals harmful to human health, whenever crowds gather to protest.

This war is taking place in virtual and material public spaces. People of the South congregate to defend themselves as cosmopolitan and as local citizens. The interplay between their abstract or digital and their material presence in this war endows them with double efficiency, global and local. A re-invention of politics is on its way all around the Mediterranean by the young generation. The only ray of hope in the gloomy crisis is this youth protest movement, consisting of yesterday’s pupils occupying schools, teenagers of December 2008, together with impoverished middle classes, redundant clerks, unemployed and precarious workers, dispossessed pensioners. The result of the elections of 6 May 2012 in the cities, is an indication that this emerging urban grassroots tends to democratization and the creation of new historic blocs (Gramsci, 1971). Solidarity among Europeans may also lead to an alternative counter-hegemonic grassroots way to European integration, now that the official one is failing. This is where Athens belongs now. There is a lot more to be expected, in terms of cultural regeneration and alternative politics, from the dynamics of unmediated spontaneous grassroots action in a city that has not lost all hope.

Notes

1 During German occupation, M. Glezos removed the swastika flag from the Acropolis together with A. Santas on the night of 30–31 May 1941. According to De Gaulle, he was ‘the first partisan of Europe’. Glezos is still fighting for justice in the repayment of German reparations and debts to Greece, for democracy and the right to protest, though he was sent to hospital after police attacks in 2011.

2 Many are concentrated in Makrygianni and Tsavdaroglou (2011) and include the relation of antiparochi (a system of exchange arrangements in building multi-storey apartment buildings in Athens) with social classes and the Marshall plan, the purported suppression of the Left by planners, wild ghettoization and redevelopment before the 2004 Olympics, the scale of emergence of squats, simplifications for areas of the rich and the poor, and other undocumented impressions at a distance from published research for the city in question.

3 The employment linkage, that is, the neighbouring between workplace and residence in precapitalist societies (Vance, 1966), was not broken in Athens until the 20th century (Leontidou, 1990).

4 Allum (1973, p. 59); he cites as ‘observers’ some post-war authors (Meyer, Luongo and Oliva, Vitiello), although Gramsci (1949, pp. 95–96) was apparently the first to observe this. See also Leontidou (1990, p. 12). The porosity of Naples also fascinated Benjamin (1979).

5 In this we would not agree with some authors in Vradis and Dalakoglou (2011), especially pp. 30–31, 33 and 53, who see in Athens so many parallels with American ghettos. In Greece, this is a new phenomenon, restricted to enclaves.

6 Not 1946, as in Kallianos (2011, p. 164), who compares the two Greek Decembers—see also Vradis (2009). We should be very cautious in considering authors as historically sensitive or reflexive when they span long periods and compare such dissimilar movements. The anthropological approach and long-term perspective, which Catterall (2011a) praises in certain authors in Vradis and Dalakoglou (2011; cf. also Catterall, 2011b), can be sometimes a trap.

7 Bauman (2011) and Leontidou (2012). There is of course a debate on this and issues arising; for a summary, which includes Greece, see Kourliouros (2003).

8 The duality, by no means polarization, of the two piazzas is countered by Stavrou (2011, pp. 36–37), but has been witnessed by reports and eyewitnesses, including the author herself. There were also other divisions for the duration of the ‘movement of the piazzas’, such as the polarization between the grassroots and the aristocracy of labour nurtured by the traditional communist party (KKE). Though this cannot be presented here because of space limitations, it should be noted that the KKE vehemently criticizes ‘the other’ Left, scorns any movement not organized under sectoral employment unions, and is thus blind to...
unemployment and poverty—not to mention any spontaneous movements. KKE (PAME) rallies are organized in separate piazzas from ‘the others’. The KKE only accepts mobilizations ‘rooted in places of work’, ignoring the fact that almost half the urban population has no work whatsoever, or is in disguised unemployment or in ‘flexible’ multiple employment!

9 Suicides for debts and desperation have increased sharply to two per day in Greece for the last two years, the highest rate in Europe.

10 At least since 23 April 2010, when Prime Minister Papandreou chose the border island of Kastellorizo in order to announce the arrival of the IMF to the Greeks, undermining his own credibility, as a few months earlier he had publicly declared that ‘there is money’ in Greece. A change is under way after May 2012, which was paved in May 2011.

References


Leontidou, L. (2010) Urban social movements in “weak” civil societies: the right to the city and cosmopolitan


Lila Leontidou is Professor of Geography and European Culture at the Hellenic Open University and Senior Fellow at the Hellenic Observatory, London School of Economics and Political Science. Email: leontidou@eap.gr; L.Leontidou@lse.ac.uk