

## THE FALL OF THE 'PURIFIED' COMMUNITY: *CRISIS, TRANSFORMATION & COLLECTIVE ACTION IN GREECE*

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(UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED)

*The article explores the recent social and political transformations in Greece through events of collective action in the public space of Athens. Drawing on Richard Sennet's notion of the 'myth of the purified community' it is argued that these events demonstrate a gradual disintegration of the social imaginary of the idea of community in various scales (national, local, etc). This argument builds on the indistinction between public and private as reflected in these events in Athens. By providing ethnographic examples from both before and after the economic collapse, the article explains crisis as a long process of contesting the sovereignty of the state and institutions in Greece and how these previously downplayed contestations were rendered visible in the Greek public sphere. This visibility shakes the foundations of the notion of a homogeneous community as it is established by the 'social contract'.*

Ever since the beginning of the 'sudden' economic meltdown the Greek republic/nation-state has officially entered an era of crisis, and thus, an era of transformation. During the last three years a series of austerity measures have been imposed which have led to the destabilization of parliamentary authority. To withstand this institutional demise the Greek state was forced to make a number of constitutional changes. Despite these and the June 2012 elections, which provided juridical legitimacy to these changes, Greek society is oscillating between separation and cohesion. What is actually reflected in the gradual challenge of institutional power is a contest of values, social practices and established beliefs in the social field.

What is at issue here is the collapse of a common interpretation of community. Gupta and Ferguson have argued that the idea of "community" is never simply the recognition of cultural similarity or social contiguity but a categorical identity that is premised on various forms of exclusion and constructions of otherness' (1997: 13). For Sennet (2004) the notion of community is essentially built on the basic postulate that people belong to a community and participate in it because they are the same. This is a basic feature of what he calls the 'myth of a purified community' (2004). According to this idea common identity is constructed and/or imagined in a process of myth making that creates a sense of

togetherness and solidarity of that community.

I draw on Sennet's idea to explain a mounting social conflict from below, challenging ideas of social and political unity and thus the notion of the homogeneous society. Following this idea I explore events of public conflict in Athens as the sites that reflect a public process of social separation and cohesion based on the rising indistinction between public and private.

Martha Ackelsberg argues that 'there is no typology or set of procedures that will allow us to draw a line between public and private that will be appropriate for all times and circumstances' (2009: 85). This idea, which has been explored by feminist theory and identity politics, is related to the collapse of the myth of the purified community. This myth is fundamentally established on the clear distinction between public and private because it requires withdrawal in private spaces and a distance from non-mediated collective action.

### **CRISIS AS TRANSFORMATION AND THE TRUTH OF THE REPUBLIC**

A month after the second consecutive elections in Greece, in July 2012, the new minister of labour participated in a meeting with representatives of GSEE<sup>1</sup>, SEV<sup>2</sup> and other syndicates where he referred to the need for a 'new social contract'. This was not the first time that

members of the Greek parliament urged such an agreement. During their pre-election campaign the three parties which currently constitute the new coalition government<sup>3</sup> all referred to the need for a 'new social contract' in their declarations of the forthcoming change.

In all of its definitions and expressions, the term crisis is intrinsically connected with meanings of decision making that could change the course of events and ideas of criticism or judgement (the Greek term *krisis* means both crisis and judgement). Its political connotations are also invested with the idea of change. According to Koselleck, from the 18th century onwards the term crisis 'pointed to fundamental changes in constitutions in which the alternatives were the survival or demise of a political entity and its constitutional order; but it could also describe a simple change of government' (2006: 369).

The reference to the announcements for a 'new social contract' by the recently elected government is valuable in our discussion as a process which is indistinct from the idea of crisis as change. But we should be careful here. It is not the economic expressions of crisis which are reflected in the 'new social contract' but essentially the meaning of crisis as the moment of a truth (Lynteris, 2011: 207) which needs to be established. The process of its legitimization (social rather than juridical) requires this moment of truth; we can also name it the high point of realization of a 'situation'. It is this awareness (of a truth) which proclaims a necessity for change. The 'new social contract' then is the forceful expression of this change and requires not merely the awareness of a truth but also, its recognition as the only truth. As we shall see it is the monopoly of that truth which is contested in the events of collective practice and conflict in Athens.

Immediately a few questions emerge: Who are the actual recipients of this plea for change? What are the main features that constitute this change? What is at issue here is the very nature of sovereignty.

If we follow Foucault's argument in his 1975-76 lectures that 'sovereignty is always shaped from below, and by those who are afraid' (2003: 96) we notice that consensus, as the fundamental agreement which establishes the sovereign, is confining as a process between two

distinctive sides; that is, the sovereign and the people. The latter, under the classification 'We,' is thus 'purified' as a homogenous community. The discourse over a 'new social contract' then is necessary in order to remind everyone of the explicit and implicit bipartition which is necessary for any western Democracy; the people (the *Demos*) and the State (*kratos*) as two complete, distinctively identified parties.

### COMMUNITIES IN SUBTLE CONFLICT; PROCESSES OF SEPARATION AND COHESION

This crisis is in its essence an ontological crisis. Douzinas explains this as an identity crisis which has been triggered by the collapse of the economic model of neoliberalism (2011: 138). As I will try to demonstrate, what is reflected in the context of the crisis in cases of public turmoil is a change in the way people give accounts of what is of value in the social world, and the way we make sense of ourselves in it. This has not only led to a dynamic challenge of institutions and sovereignty from the wider part of society, but also, exposed in the public sphere, differentiations which constitute the social field and were previously concealed under the veil of national reconciliation. It therefore shuts the homogeneous interpretations of the people (the *Demos*) as a 'purified' community.

It was the murder of fifteen year old Alexandros Grigoropoulos by police in Exarcheia on December 6, 2008 which unleashed a collective political force whose dynamic collective practice and geographical (spatial) reach had never been seen in Greek territory until then.

In particular, the pattern of squatting public universities and city halls flourished during that period. These buildings were not merely sites of political struggle or strongholds of militant practices, but rather, they became the space where other socialities could develop.

In the occupation of the Athens University of Economics and Business (ASOEE), a daily anti-hierarchical, anti-commercial collective kitchen had been organized, while in the occupied city hall in Agios Dimitrios, the main assembly provided free Greek language lessons to immigrants. These actions suggest another experience of what it means to participate in the community.



**FIGURE 1** The occupation of the City Hall in Agios Dimitrios, a suburb in southern Athens. The large banner reads: ‘You disgust us! The interplay between politicians, priests, journalists, judges, lawyers, cops, pimps and drug dealers has created a big trash pile. We spit on you’.

Even more, these actions put forward another understanding of everyday life. From this point of view the events of the December 2008 revolt can be seen as a disagreement on how we understand and imagine what constitutes this ‘We’.

This was particularly evident in the temporary occupations of the ‘General Confederation of Greek Workers’ (GSEE) on December 17, 2008 in Athens, the ‘Journalists’ Union of the Athens Daily Newspapers’ (ESIEA) during the first days of January 2009 and the Greek National Opera on January 30, 2009. These occupations functioned under the scope of a specific criticism concerning the official and institutional feature of these spaces, but also a general scepticism regarding the neoliberal structure of everyday life. In a communiqué published by the assembly of the occupied Opera House we read:

December’s rebellion, while drawing strength from all previous social struggles, laid the ground for a generalized resistance against everything that offends us and enslaves our lives. It triggered a fight for life that is being disparaged on a daily basis. As an answer to those who understand rebellion as a short lived firecracker, and discard and undermine it by simply saying “life



**FIGURE 2** The occupation of the GSEE building in central Athens. The main banner reads: ‘The self-organization of workers will be the end of bosses.’

goes on”, we say that the struggle not only continues but has already set our lives on a new basis. (2009)<sup>4</sup>

What can be argued about this period is that the socio-political framework in which the daily events were taking place forced people to re-position in the social field and thus engage with the commons in a more immediate way, exposing vital differences in the way people imagine what a community is.

The December 2008 revolt initiated a rupture of the kind of neo-liberal individuality which is prevalent in modern societies. As Douzinas explains, ‘the December insurrection disrupted the settled state of recognized differences: what was invisible, unspoken, and unspeakable (under the pre-existing rules) came to the fore’ (2010: 286).

In the midst of tear gas, burnt and looted stores, occupations, and stones and marbles cast at riot police, a set of unmediated interactions matured into collective action. Stavrides (2010) explains this process as osmotic relations between identities. According to him identities were renegotiated through collective action. ‘In open assemblies organized in all occupied places, people tended to describe proposals for



**FIGURE 3** A big banner during the occupation of the National Opera House. The banner is a painting of a performing ballet dancer wearing a tear gas mask while holding a petrol bomb.

action, to describe dreams and values rather than passively describe disempowering situations or criticize others just for being others' (Stavrídes 2010). These practices, which questioned the established power, created a critical path towards the public sphere which was not state-related. This had as a result the gradual development of a multiplicity of schisms in the public sphere since the way people interacted and interrelated in everyday life was inevitably formative of the event of the revolt.

Another aspect that was constitutive of the revolt during that period was the strengthening of political cultures which challenged parliamentary democracy and institutional power in general. This deep distrust towards these structures had already become evident in previous years. In 2006-07 the student movement rose to oppose the reform of a law concerning public education that the right wing government of New Democracy wanted to pass. In the streets the students chanted 'either with the ties, or with the hoods' and marked Athenian walls with the slogan 'Varkiza is cancelled, we are at war'<sup>5</sup>. A few months later in the summer of 2007 thousands gathered out-

side parliament to protest against the failure of the state to prevent one of the biggest natural disasters in Greece's modern history: a fire that burned down more than 268.834 hectares of forested land in August 2007. The sit-in was organized mainly through the internet. It was during that time that the radical slogan "burn the parliament" was adopted as a popular demand.

Since April/May 2010, when the Greek government officially contracted an agreement for a bailout with IMF and EU, a series of austerity measures have caused structural changes in the everyday life of people in Greece. Unemployment is mounting and the public sector is gradually being privatized. The number of homeless people has increased by more than 25% and images of people of any age searching in trash bins for either food or materials has become an everyday phenomenon since early 2010. These structural changes have also affected the way people participate in the commons in Athens and Greece in general.

On May 25, 2011 hundreds of thousands of people began to gather in Syntagma (constitution) Square. The square is just across from Parliament and next to one of the most expensive shopping streets in Athens, Ermou Street. Those who took to the streets that day answered a call which had spread around the social media on the previous days with the intention of openly challenging political authority and the government's agenda for new austerity measures. This call resulted in an occupation of Syntagma Square which lasted until July 2011.

The open public space of the square was gradually organized according to the needs and desires of the people who occupied it. During these protests a multitude of people occupied both Amalias Street in front of Parliament and the public space of Syntagma Square. These two spaces are both separated and united by a large marble staircase which leads to the metro station situated on the square.

Since day one of the occupation a subtle separation was identified between those who protested in Amalias Street and the people who organized in the public space of the square. This political difference was reflected in the way each space was organized. In Amalias Street protesters holding Greek flags would target their

emotions of anger, mistrust and bewilderment directly against the Parliament building. People shouted slogans such as ‘thieves’ and ‘burn Parliament, it is a whorehouse’ as well as pointing at the building with cheap laser pointers.

On the other hand, on Syntagma Square people gradually organized a network of spaces under the political framework of the main assembly. Tents had been set all over the grass to host the various groups which had been created, while statues, benches and trees became the formative material for creative interventions, graffiti and slogans.

The differences between these two forms of political practice have been classified with the distinction between the ‘upper square’ (pano plateia) and ‘lower square’ (kato plateia) (Stavrou 2011, Leontidou 2012:306). What is distinctive in this case is that even though quite schematic, this distinction reveals the heterogeneity of the multitude which participated in the occupation of Syntagma Square. The public space of Syntagma Square became a site of intense social interaction, a place where emotions, ideas and differences were exchanged, resolved, disputed and even confronted. By doing this people reclaimed their right to negotiate their identities and the idea of what it means to be part of a community, putting into question its homogeneity. From this point of view, in Syntagma Square people challenged the very role of the state as institutional mediator. As a result, the Greek republic resorted to force to contest and ultimately reclaim this public space, acting to restore the dipole between Demos (as the homogeneous national community) and State (the sovereign). On June 15 and June 28-29, 2011 the police violently attacked and dispersed the people in Syntagma Square. For several hours the public space of Parliament and the nearby avenues, alleys and streets were the site of irregular urban warfare.

In the next few months these antitheses sharpened. On October 20, 2011, the second day of a two day national strike, PAME, the ‘All-Workers Militant Front’ trade union of the Greek Communist Party (KKE), joined the protests for the first time and blocked off Parliament. According to them they tried to prevent MPs from entering the building to vote for new austerity measures. Their human chain around Parlia-

ment faced the crowd holding helmets and carrying red flag bats. Soon it became obvious that only KKE members were allowed to protest in Amalias Street. For anarchists, leftists and others the communists were actually protecting Parliament, securing the voting process. Riot police never actually interfered when clashes began between the communists and several other groups. In the next few hours small-scale civil strife took place. Several people were injured in the clashes which involved petrol bombs, rocks, wooden sticks and man to man fights. Despite the deep antagonism between communists and anti-authoritarians/anarchists in Greece, the level of violence had never been raised so high.



FIGURE 4 A slogan in central Athens, June 26, 2011. It reads: ‘Class Civil War’.

## THE RISE OF NEW COMMUNITIES

Vradis asserts that the paradigm of the occupation of Syntagma Square suggests a termination of the spatial contract. According to this idea public space can be contested as long as the practice of the contest is temporary (Vradis, 2011:214). This permanence, demonstrated by the persistence to remain in the public sphere (and public space), contributes to the indistinction between public and private. When these political events acquire a permanent feature people engage with each other in a non-mediated manner, inventing new social tools.

In Greece, the distinction between private and public traverses almost all spatial arrangements. Home (oikos) is primarily a private space. The idea that “the house guards intimate secrets” (Herzfeld, 2005:216) is evi-

dent even in the architectonic arrangements of doors, windows and balconies. This is strongly rooted around the idea that ‘ta en oiko mi en dhimo’, or, what happens at home (oikos) –privacy- stays at home (Herzfeld, 2005:142).

However, the passage from private to public space is not new in the Greek context. As has been observed, the coffee-houses (kafeneio), until recently an exclusive male space (Herzfeld, 1985:52), used to be the place where politicians addressed the community (Herzfeld, 1985:119) and are identified as the space where community narratives intersect, coalesce or collide with each other. It is by any means a public space. Perhaps then it is also the strengthening of the private-public indistinction which has led people to attack, either verbally or physically, members of parliament (mostly those who have voted for the austerity measures) in taverns, restaurants and coffee houses or even to organize protests outside their houses.

The cases examined are paradigmatic of the indistinction between private and public which was promoted in collective action. In the December 2008 revolt, mourning had become altogether a public matter in political terms. By referring to the collapse of the myth of a homogeneous community, I argue for the rising realization that what people call ‘We’ is actually elusive.

One of the effects that this has had in the public sphere is the attempt to re-invent this myth on the basis of a more homogeneous and dynamic, but more unstable, framework, namely the rise of neo-fascists<sup>6</sup>.

However, at the same time, this collapse also gave way to other modes of social conduct and provided common sites where new communities could be re-invented which will not be constituted on homogeneity and exclusion but rather the opposite. Stavrides’s (2011) has explained the formation of such communities as communities in movement in reference to the recent phenomena of collective action in Athens. He understands these communities in the absence of any hierarchical format as well as lacking a ‘predominance of a central space’ (2011:6). This crisis, rather than establishing the one truth of the sovereign, is tearing it down into a multitude of truths. ☞

## NOTES

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- 1 General Confederation of Greek Workers.
- 2 Hellenic Federation of Enterprises.
- 3 The coalition government is formed by New Democracy, PASOK (Panhellenic Socialist Movement, and DIMAR (Democratic Left).
- 4 <http://apeleftheromenilyriki.blogspot.co.uk/2009/01/rebelling-interactive-opera-theatre.html>
- 5 This a direct reference to the Varkiza pact signed in 1945 between the Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs (supported by the British) and the Secretary of the Communist Party of Greece (KKE). It ordered the disarming and destruction of ELAS (National People’s Army of Liberation) which was the military arm of the left-wing National Liberation Front (EAM).
- 6 I am referring to the neo-fascist party Golden Dawn which currently holds 18 seats in Parliament since the June 2012 elections.

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*All photos by Yannis Kallianos, except Figure 1 courtesy of the 'Agios Dimitrios People's Open Assembly'; [http://katadimadim.blogspot.gr/2008/12/blog-post\\_8471.html](http://katadimadim.blogspot.gr/2008/12/blog-post_8471.html)*

