Networking activism: implications for Greece

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The riots

On the Saturday night of the 6th December of 2008 a 15-year old pupil, Alexis Grigoropoulos, was shot dead by a police officer in the Exarcheia district of Athens. A wave of rigid contestation, including demonstrations, sit-ins, direct actions, mobilization practices and violent riots against police, state buildings, banks and multinational organizations, followed this event.

At first place, a spontaneous call for action at Exarcheia area paved the way; the streets of the city center were transformed into battle grounds – fires and barricades, attacks on police departments with stones and molotov cocktails, and property damages were few of the raging manifestations of rebellious groups. Soon after, university buildings (Polytechnic, Law and Economic and Business faculties) were occupied by student, anarchist and leftist groups. The following days two mass demonstrations took place in the center of Athens with the further participation of various social actors, including immigrants, workers, parents of students and conscious citizens in general.

At the same time, the realm of contestation expanded across the country with demonstrations in every big city. The demonstrations of thousands of protesters all over Greece on those days were followed by intensive riots in various neighborhoods and central points (the flaming Christmas tree in Syntagma square), involving clashes with the police and an unprecedented wave of material damages. In addition, this cry of discontent, deployed in a constant three-day rioting, was accompanied by solidarity protests all over the world.

The district of Exarcheia

Exarcheia is a central Athens district where the buildings of Athens Polytechnic University as well as many of the departments of Athens University,

are situated, and as such it is populated by a large number of students, intellectuals and artists.

The bloody suppression of the rebellion of Polytechnic's students by the dictatorship of Colonels in 1973 has been an emblematic act connected to the area. During this period, various social, political and sub-cultural groups that had been suppressed during the dictatorship emerged. Ever since, Exarcheia became the stage of activist groups, their trajectories and practices. It brought together many young people from different backgrounds, providing a vibrant territory for the formation of counter-publics. Namely, Exarcheia has been a melting-pot for social actors, political (extra-parliamentary leftists, autonomists, radicals, anarchists), social (ecologists, feminists, ethnic minorities, conscientious objectors) and cultural (music and art subcultures) ones, forming the so called 'alternative milieu'. There, they express themselves, interact and promote their own cultural life, challenging the dominant social standards, values and claiming their distinctiveness. Tsagarousianou (1993: 235-6) sketches characteristic features of this vibrant milieu:

> [T]hey derived their distinctiveness from their alternative values, visions and lifestyles; they emphasized the centrality of 'freedom', 'creativity' and 'imagination' in their lifestyles as opposed to 'traditional', 'common-sense', 'petty-bourgeois' values of 'restraint', 'responsibility' and 'pragmatism'. They were critical of a variety of aspects of social life such as its hierarchical organization, the institution of paid work, the distinction between work and leisure, the repression of sexuality, formal schooling and education, academic authoritarianism at the university, psychiatric violence, materialist values, consumption and consumerism, the destruction of the environment, militarism and military service, and of what they interpreted as the subordination of social life to the political parties and their subsidiary organizations.

The proliferation of autonomous assembly points (*stekia*), social centres, political initiatives, cultural activities, alternative publication houses, etc. have constituted what Keane (1998: 172) defines as 'laboratories' – 'public spaces in which the elements of everyday life are mixed, remixed, developed and tested'. As such, the district of Exarcheia played a significant role as the locale of the uprising (see Iakovidou, J., Kanellopoulos, K. and Kotronaki, L. 2009).

The Greek research agenda

Before we explore different approaches on December events an outline of the relevant Greek research agenda is needed.

On the one hand, there is a considerable work by Greek scholars that focuses on political culture. The special characteristics of Greek political culture have been drawn on various religious, social and political traditions of Greek society, highlighting its 'selective' nature (Demertzis, 1994). Prominent here is the idiosyncratic osmosis between political parties and the state, and the prevalence of clientelistic, statist and populist practices that had further implications on the social structures. The political parties became the intermediaries between state and society, meaning the main mechanism of social integration and organization, which resulted in the guardianship of every social domain by the party system and the absence of well-organised and cohesive pressure groups (Mouzelis, 1986). From this perspective, the modes of political socialisation within the conventional political sphere (clientistic and bureaucratic system) have determined the character of political participation – lack of processes and practices of social commitment and the individualistic engagement of people in things in common. Hence, while conventional political sphere has been transformed into the exclusive arena for the realization of political socialization, political participation has been transformed into the main 'instrument' for the satisfaction of private interests and privileges (Tsagarousianou, 1994). These aspects point out the 'subjected', in contrast to the 'participant', character of Greek political culture (Diamandouros, 1983). These features have been addressed in terms of preventing Greek society from having vibrant public space and life, as the latter have been sketched in western experience across the concepts of civil society, public sphere and citizenship. Accordingly, political participation in Greece has been evaluated as void of its social content, preventing forms of social, political representation and collective action to emerge.

On the other hand, less work, though developing the last decade, has been done in terms of sub-cultures and social movements, their discourses and practices 'on the margins'. The crucial role of student movement during the military dictatorship has been the main source of resistant practices in Greece. The organizational and political autonomy of the anti-dictatorial student movement, characterized by the absence of hierarchical, bureaucratic, and cen-

tralized practices, was its basic principle which guaranteed the unity of the movement and promoted it as the main enemy of the military status (Dafermos, 1992). This organization of the student movement promoted its constitution in the quotidian field – 'reflecting issues related to the improvement of social conditions, the development of political relations among citizens and, the quality and improvement of the daily life ... being structured by the public, within which it emerges, a human force, a live and always dynamic cluster, which, despite the various periodical contradictions, could always oversee the right way of opposition it had to follow' Lazos (1987: 18). Few studies have focused on more fragmented radical movements. Karabelas (1985/2002) sketches historically the space and forms of the armed guerrilla movement in Greece during the first period after the fall of military dictatorship, putting emphasis on their main characteristics, their political identity, and their practices. While, Karabelias (1986) draws on the emergence of the realm of an 'alternative, autonomous movement' away from both a static ideological framework (the case of the marxist-leninist-trotskist versions of leftism) and the extremism of a violent rebellion (the case of the armed grassroots movement).

In addition, limited attention has been paid on grassroots media practices in Greece that have diachronically promoted the inclusion of marginalized social domains, heterogeneous discourses, and diverse social actors in public and political life. It is noteworthy that the first initiatives to introduce press and radio in Greece, before they become firmly established, took place "on the margins". Significantly, alternative projects were developed soon before the fall of dictatorship; various publications, some of them were published out of the Greek territory, were denouncing the exploitative and repressive character of the society; while, numerous radio amateurs/pirates were broadcasting in the medium wave in the 60s. The spring of grassroots media practices in Greece took place in the 70s, during the last years of colonel's rule onwards. A variety of anarchist, leftist (extra-parliamentary left), ecologist, cultural (art/music/literature), and of specific interest papers emerged that period, challenging the dominant social values and patterns, introducing new ideas. Many of them were published irregularly, or discontinue their publication, while new ones emerged; in any case, they were imaginative in every sense. A decisive moment in grassroots radio broadcasting had been the case of the clandestine radio station of the Athens Polytechnic University that was set up during the dictatorship. Soon after the restoration of democracy

we notice the emergence of the political pirates of free radio broadcasting (Barboutis, 1994). They were set up by students, radio activists and intellectuals who were asking for the right to get their own space on air, challenging the state monopoly on broadcasting. Regarding new media practices, it is in the last decade (due to the low level of Internet penetration too) they became important tool for various social actors in the Greek context. By making a comparative Web site analysis of environmental NGOs at a European level, in terms of the impact of new social movements on participatory politics and citizenship, mobilizing the wider public towards active participation and direct action, Tsaliki (2003) points out among other things, the amateurish look of most of the Web pages of Greek ecologist organizations, compared to the sites of North Europe – heavily informative character; generally poor sites, underdeveloped in terms of content; restricting themselves in describing their mission and offering very modest interactive facilities (ibid: appendix 2, the case of Greece). Still, various grassroots groups become growingly active through the Internet, and the Web sites of some of them are advanced enough; having also a relatively high number of visitors. Characteristic is here the case of Indymedia Athens. Nevertheless, the role of new media practices was important during the December events.

Approaches of December events

Accordingly, December riots have mainly been evaluated along two parameters: the nature of Greek political culture; and, less, the extent to which protests have been a manifestation of social movement.

The publication of the Hellenic Observatory of the London School of Economics – *The return of street politics? Essays on the December riots in Greece* (2009) – provides the first attempt to analyze December events. The concern of the authors of this volume is mostly about the causes of the riots and the questions addressed by them for Greek politics and society. As such, they focus on the social pathologies and institutional incapacities that allowed these protests and their implications for mainstream politics, political parties, the processes of social representation and engagement, and the political process in Greece in general (Economides and Monastiriotis, 2009: viii-x). From this perspective, the protests are connected with 'inherent structural distorti-

ons within basic social institutions' of Greek society (Kalokerinos, 2009: 24), where 'the party logic penetrates all institutional spheres undermining their autonomy and their specific values' (Mouzelis, 2009: 43). The prevailing forces of clientelism and their conflicting needs, the inefficiency and corruption of the unions and the lack of constituency for liberal economic reform reveal a 'blocked society', where 'the system cannot process competing social demands to satisfying rising expectations' (Featherstone, 2009: 3). At the same time, the very undermining of civil society by the party politics has 'restricted the representation of collective interests in associations as well as the development of autonomous social groups', demoralizing civil society; 'the prevailing values in the society are those of distrust, lack of solidarity, indifference to common interests, and contempt of the law' (Zeri, 2009: 71). This process has implications for the very character – dead-end, unfocused and diffused – of the protests and mobilizations (Mouzelis, 2009: 43). The weakness of civil society is reflected on the absence of the production of coherent 'discourses' and alternative strategies concerning the interplay between the 'social' and the 'political'. '[T[he political and social conditions – with their inherent conflicts and contradictions – make it difficult for the protesters to establish a 'hegemonic' agenda (Featherstone, 2009: 3). For others, the following to clientelism 'decline of "ideologicopolitics" and the organizational demise of official political parties' gave pace to the development of an anti-systemic movement, which 'found international expression through the anti-globalization movement' (Karakousis, 2009: 30). Under this prism, various anti-establishment flanking forces, autonomist, anti-capitalist, anti-authoritarian, and anarchist ones were viewed as having influence on marginalised sections of Greek youth, constituting thus a dynamic front of contestation during December events. Besides, the havoc caused during December has been attributed to the exploitation of the demonstrations by the anti-globalization movement; 'more and more dissatisfied and frustrated citizens and groups of citizens resort to protest politics which is butter on the bread of the "professional rioters"' (Anastasakis, 2009: 7).

The focus on the systemic failures of Greek political system as the explanatory framework of December riots, though significant for understanding the context of the uprising cannot be enough for accounting the range of mobilizations that took place in December and the diversity of the social actors that participated in them, but for any professional rioters (in the same way that

mass media talk about the 'hooded ones' – *koukouloforoi*). Nevertheless, the mobilizations of December manifested something more than blind violence; those practices of resistance employed multiple messages conveyed by different social actors. The article of Gavriilidis (2009) is the exception in this volume, shedding light on this aspect. In specific, Gavriilidis evaluates the several performative statements ('produced by the very act of enunciation') that were constituted by a multiple subject during the riots. '[I]t is neither the "youth", nor the "working" or the "middle class". To be sure, most of the rioters are in – or alternate between – one or more of these statuses. But they never invoked any of these as an essentialist and exclusive source, as the "ultimate reason" of their revolt' (ibid: 16). What was generally questionable is the 'cultural intimacy' of their society concerning life itself.'With this movement a large part of Greek – and also migrant – youth expressed an anxiety before the possibility not of *missing* [a certain] life style, but precisely of *getting it*: they declared that this is *not* what they perceive as a meaningful life, and they are not willing to sacrifice all their vital energy in order to achieve it' (ibid: 19, emphasis in the original).

An attempt to probe into the experience of December events has been undertaken in another volume with the title: *We are an image from the future – the Greek revolt of December 2008,* (2010). The book is a kind of storytelling of December insurrection from the standpoint of those engaged in it. Firstly, various accounts of committed, long-time activists, participants in anarchist groups and networks, libertarian publishers and freethinkers of the Exarcheia neighbourhood are employed to draw the fabric of anarchist movement in Greece. Then, interviews with those who witnessed and participated in the Greek revolt alongside photo and text material (graffiti, posters, etc.) that was circulated during the uprising provide an on-the-ground portrait of December actions. Finally, further practices of disobedience the year following December events are sketched, revealing, according to the standpoint of this book, that although 'nothing changed everything is different' (Sagris, 2010: 358-363). Despite the fact that the volume privileges the aspect of human agency, as it is reflected on the practices of social movements, the overall approach is mostly descriptive. However, a methodological route is needed to account for social actions and activist networking during December events in a decisive manner, evaluating the ways in which the dominant discourse and power were contested (see Papadimitropoulos, 2010).

A systematic analysis of the violent contention occurred in December 2008 has been made by Aliki Tzatha (2009) in her MA thesis – *Street politics and social movements: a list of opportunities or a multitude of desire*. In normative terms, the study addresses itself beyond the structural bias of that political process theory. Instead of seeking for deterministic factors and conditions of the contention, the study experiments with new analytical frameworks that evaluate the interplay between structure/culture and collective action, evaluating different activist subjects' positions. From this perspective, it acknowledges *different repertoires of action deployed by activist subjects during December events, drawing on differences in the configurations of institutions and discourses, and therefore both in actors' opportunities/resources and representations* (ibid: 10). The interaction between political opportunity structures and resource mobilization, or what the author calls political and social structure/culture aspects is important in order to understand both the constitution of activist subjects and their collective action. On the one hand, political structures 'do not have a significance as directly creating temporal opportunities for action, but constitute the background in which social norms, meanings and resources shaping contention are all constructed' (ibid: 17). On the other hand, 'the existence of dense clusters or of social movement organizations cannot account for collective action, since these mobilizing structures are only relevant when they promote a relevant identity' (ibid: 25).

Central in this approach is the evaluation of the relationship between structures and action on the grounds of social interaction, taking thus into account both opportunities and desires set before and during the mobilizations of December 2008. Before probing into this relationship and its implications for December events, it is time to look into the organizational inputs of these mobilizations.

The networking

Though broadly recognized in reports and analyses, the role of new communication technologies in December uprising has not been systematically researched.

Most of the considerations of the events highlight the accumulative and coordinating values of the use of new media, bringing together different so-

cial actors, protesting on the streets. Prominent alternative websites (Athens Independent Media Centre), diverse social media applications – blogs (of occupied Universities), microblogs (Twitter), networking sites (Facebook) – and, the mobile synergy of SMS were prominent tools of communication and exchange of information (texts, photos and videos) for individuals, affinity groups, collectivities and associations (students, leftists, anarchists, unemployed, migrants, etc.) who participated in the uprising. 'As a consequence of the information revolution, the likelihood of an individual receiving and broadcasting information is increasing significantly while the likelihood of any two people communicating is increasing exponentially' (Meier, 2008). It is in this way that high schools children coordinated, without any central leading body, attacking simultaneously forty five police stations all over Greece (Gavriilidis, 2009: 15). Internet and mobile technologies made possible the networking of dispersed actors across different locales of the country; moreover, the new media practices conveyed an alternative public sphere countering the formal one. Tzatha (2009: 37) sketches the colourful tapestry of this alternative sphere as follows:

> Weblogs created by almost all decentralized foci of political struggle and social interaction quoted poetry, wrote jokes, political texts, revolutionary literature, and communicated with each other by posting comments, answering to publications of the mainstream media, sending letters. Workers posted letters in the weblogs of the pupils, pupils posted letters to the parents through their weblogs, weblogs of University occupations reposted entries from the weblogs of immigrants' haunts, neighbourhood weblogs posted information about actions abroad and so on. Hundreds of groups on Facebook.com expressing opinions about the December events, online discussion forums about actions and ideas create a whole new public sphere opposing or evading the public sphere of the mass media, and making communication possible between distant parts of the society.

Furthermore, this kind of networking attributed an important characteristic to the December uprising that of mobility of the collective actions, transcending their locality. According to Gavriilidis (2009: 18), the protestors staged a 'nomadic-itinerant Tiananmen' – '[they] repeatedly stormed Syntagma square, then retreated, came back again, appeared in other neighbourhoods – and towns – where no demonstrations had ever taken place'.

Such mobility of collective actions was also manifested beyond the national borders. Numerous contentious events took place in big cities around the

world (Istanbul, Madrid, Copenhagen, Amsterdam, Moscow, Seoul, Montevideo, etc.), including demonstrations in solidarity with the Greek revolt, rallies in front of, and attacks on, Greek embassies and consulates, as well as direct action events. Twelve days after the shooting of the 15-year-old boy in Athens an article on *Economist* (2008) – *Rioters of the World Unite* – describes the enormous spread of sympathy protests over the local, Greek, issue as follows:

> Already, the Greek riots are prompting talk of a new era of networked protest. The volume of online content they have inspired is remarkable. Photos and videos of the chaos, often shot with cellphones, were posted online almost in real time. Twitter... has brimmed with lived reports from the streets of Athens... A tribune to the slain teenager – a clip... of photos with music from a popular rock band – appeared on YouTube,... shortly after his death; more than 160,000 people have seen it. A similar tribute group on Facebook has attracted more than 130,000 members, generating thousands of messages and offering links to more than 1,900 related items: images of the protests, cartoons and leaflets... A memorial was erected in Second Life,... giving its users a glimpse of real-life material from the riots. Many other online techniques – such as maps detailing police deployments and routes of the demonstrations – came of age in Athens.

The title of the article – *Rioters of the world unite* – is indicative of the potential constitution of a transnational movement networked spontaneously. Soon after the Greek uprising, the solidarity movement had little to do with what was specifically Greek, and more with what is generally global, the oppression of the state. '[P]hotographs of demonstrations raising banners exclusively in Korean, Portuguese, Spanish, Russian, Turkish, Bulgarian, etc. or texts distributed and letters sent by foreign affinity groups from all around the world indicate that solidarity actions were also organised without the initiative or support of Greek diasporas, solely responding to a transnational movement of solidarity and not to a Greece-specific uprise' (Tzatha, 2009: 16).

The perspectives

Networking has been a privileged area of interest in respect to the creation of transnational publics. Significant parameters are here the enhancement of interaction and the enrichment of relations among social subjects, individual and collective ones, across physical, social, political and cultural spaces.

However these 'publics' are conceptualised, social agents or social spaces of action (see Olesen, 2005), their constitution depends on networked communication practices.

New communication technologies brought instantly different social actors together in December 2008, protesting on the streets. They provided also the tools for them to disseminate information and accounts from the very terrain of conflict. These networked rebellious crowds, the 'snap mobs' according to Meier (2008), formed intertwined pathways for collective action. Still, most accounts of the rioting draw either on prospective forms of empowerment for the participants, or on respective implications for the very constitution of an overall movement, mainly articulated under the veil of the anti-globalization or anarchist perspective. Thus, spontaneous networked protesting has been addressed as expanding the realm of the realization of a transnational movement beyond preset reactions to formal summits and events.

Not much actual research has been done on December uprising in regards to its transnational potential. Mowbray's research, *Blogging the Greek riots: between aftermath and ongoing engagement* (2010), has been the exception of the rule. Inquiring the constitution of an activist (anarchist) imaginary, Mowbray run an ethnographic research on blogs that remained active after the December 24th break in street actions, providing information and commenting on issues raised by the Greek unrest. In view of that, the study 'discuss virtual spaces as a site of opposition to mainstream accounts, trace some of the connections drawn with diverse struggles, international (and translocal) contexts, and considers elements of a possible anarchist "collective identity"' (Mowbray, 2010: 4). In specific, Mowbray points out that elements of such a collective identity include both cognitive aspects – a general holistic account of analogous, interlinked injustices as a field of action, and aesthetics ones, the mediation (in the virtual sphere of blogs) of 'poetic' texts and images that contests the dominant 'spectacle'. 'Surely no replacement for engaged on-the-ground action, online virtual spaces have been used to ends which contribute to the elaboration of an oppositional collective identity and to an (anarchist) activist imaginary that actively resists the foreclosure of the uprising in Greece – or of any struggle against domination – as a limited and isolated "event"' (Mowbray, 2010: 14). However, intriguing enough is whether this kind of activism (employing new media practices and having a transnational appeal)

has further implications for 'traditional' local cultures of organizing and protesting in social movement groups.

A study on diverse grassroots media projects in Greece – *The echoes of grassroots media practices in Greece: a sociological approach*, 2004 – has highlighted some issues that are relevant here. Drawing on the limits of these projects, it points out some interesting parameters. In general, the discourses that these projects encompass are not thrown into the public sphere to see how they do in relation to other ones, either within the alternative realm, or in the broader public sphere. Also, the conception of the 'political' exclusively in traditional, ideological-partisan terms is a barrier to the very practice of such projects and the challenges it encompasses in political terms (to constitute new forms of political action in the quotidian field). Hence, grassroots media practices in Greece are still realized, more or less, in the shadows of particular well established political and ideological predispositions. However, the vulnerability of these projects to the politics that mediate their practice is reflected to an extent variably. Relating different projects in terms of both the way participants understand and situate these projects in general, and the way they experience the process of being engaged in them, an interesting point has be made about their practice: projects which have not exclusively 'local' origins, including prominently the case of Indymedia Athens, were less self-limited, than the other projects, in the way they communicate their practice in the public and political life (Vatikiotis, 2004: 189 – 215). The connection of the local IMCs to the global network structure is crucial here. Probing into the activity of users in the case of Indymedia Athens, Milioni (2009: 427) identifies a significant aspect of the online practice, what she calls 'delocalized networked (inter)action':

> the increasingly significant role of the network, as an organizational form, for collaboration, coordination and combined action between previously disconnected – collective or individual – actors of civil society, in delocalized and transnational contexts. Indymedia counterpublics use their safe online places for connecting to global networks and considerations, constructing identities, forging solidarities and coordinating their common activities.

Another aspect of the interaction between 'local' and 'global' within the realm of social movements includes the consequences of transcendal networking practices on local related cultures.

Epilogue

From this perspective, further questions could be raised in terms of the social and cultural implications of the transnational networking of December events for the very process of social activism and identification in Greece.

As discussed above, the possibilities social movements and grassroots, alternative practices encompass for the politicization of social domains, their discourses and activities 'on the margins' of public life in Greece, have to be grasped at the expense of their weaning from their hetero-determination by conventional politics.

On December 2008, various social actors – anarchists, leftists, antiauthoritarians, students and many newcomer activists – came together, interacting with the ongoing movement's environment from different perspectives and subject positions. Moreover, this process took place in a transcended context, where multiple interactions enhanced the realm of contestation, and enriched the meanings of the social actions. In view of that, it is challenging to probe into the implications of that spontaneous movement with transnational appeal for local social activism, in terms of the interplay between characteristics of national political culture and elements of transnational networking culture. As Tzatha (2009: 44) points out: 'this movement is simultaneously situated in a global synchronic and a local historic space-time and consequently draws from its experience and knowledge of a world that is simultaneously the network society and the Greek society of clientelism, politicized University, anti-police sentiment etc. Inside these multiple systems actors interact and through interaction create meaning, social and behavioural norms, material resources'.

Concluding, the question to be addressed in reference to 'December 2008' concerns the extent to what the transnational networking of the movement and its experience by social actors in Greece has challenged traditional ideological boundaries in which alternative discourses and actions are set in the specific social, cultural, and political context.

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