No More Heroes? Rejection and Reverberation of the Past in the 2008 Events in Greece

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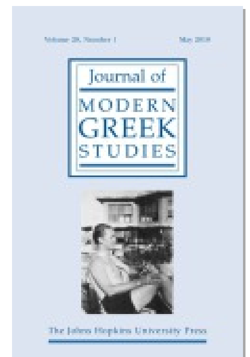

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Abstract

This article attempts to trace the contested relationship between the December 2008 riots in Greece and the revolutionary past, aiming to promote a discussion on the dynamic relationship between past and present. The article argues that even though the activists' repertoire was pretty much removed from the past, their discourse often echoed or reverberated its poetics. The article further discusses how past movements—including December 1944, May 1968 and the Polytechnic events of 1973, were picked up and promoted by the media as compelling alter egos. The paper further reacts against the assertion put forward by prominent analysts that the 2008 "December events" were a direct consequence of the so-called "spirit of the metapolitefsi" and catalogues the novel characteristics of the movement, including the extensive use of technology and its transnational outlook.

> The boys and girls of today think they've invented the world. Youngsters always think that the world begins with them.
>
> Pietro Nenni in Orianna Fallaci's *Interview with History*

Placing one's self in a longstanding revolutionary tradition has been a typical feature in leftwing social movements ever since the *ur*-historical uprising of the modern era, the French Revolution. The so-called Polytechnic Generation in Greece, for example, that spearheaded the anti-dictatorship struggle in the early 1970s coined the slogan "*EAM-ELAS-Polytechneio*" in order to create an imaginary link with the generation that waged the wartime resistance of the 1940s (Kornetis 2006). In contrast to Italy and the critique of the *Resistenza*, the 1970s activists in Greece worshiped and idealized the wartime Communist resistance and its revolutionary tradition, which operated in highly selective ways. In its turn,

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the Polytechnic Generation itself became "a culturally reproduced site of youth rebellion" for many generations to come (Karamichas 2009:291). The December 2008 events in Greece, namely a series of nation-wide riots in the aftermath of the killing in cold blood of the 15-year-old student Alexis Grigoropoulos in the center of Athens by an armed policeman, tried—at least programmatically—to become an exception to this rule.

The "December Events" of 2008 were three weeks of civil disobedience, violent demonstrations and destruction of public and private property but also peaceful sit-ins outside the parliament, all triggered by Alexis's (as he became known) death. Impromptu demonstrations and extensive riots took place, several university buildings were occupied, protesters clashed daily with the police, and a general rage against state arbitrariness and police impunity was expressed. Even a banner was raised on the Acropolis calling for "resistance." As Hara Kouki notes, "three gunshots and a dead 15-year-old boy [...] trigger[ed] the most severe acts of civil unrest that the country has seen in its entire post-1974 dictatorial era" (Kouki 2009:2).

The majority of the activists to a great extent tried to avoid identification with past events, even though this tendency was not a coherent one. The main attitude was one of a stated indifference: here, the politically contestatory events seemed indifferent to the historical precedent(s) (Liakos 2008). Accordingly, one of the major slogans printed in leaflets during the December Events read, "We are an Image Coming from the Future," exemplifying a "time of the now" attitude, a conviction that the moment cannot be postponed. Similarly, the 2008 student movement in Italy, dubbed "anomalous wave," declared that "*Il nostro tempo è qui e comincia adesso*" ("Our time is here and it starts now"), again cutting the bridges with the past and stressing the "here and now" conviction almost verbatim. This of course cannot but bring to mind the slogan "the future is now" of May '68, underlining the *hic et nunc* attitude that characterizes social movements (Kornetis 2009c). The majority of the activists based their stance on the grounds that outside analysts committed a very basic misreading in trying to identify elements of continuity with the recent or distant "revolutionary past." Several blogs, for example, pointed at these connections as a construct coming from external projection: "Their biggest error is that they search for elements of the past that the insurrected ones themselves are constantly trying to avoid," according to one of them (G. Zeros, Loaded Pencil Blog, comment posted 21 December 2008).

This rejection was contradicted by the facts, since the past was present at least in terms of slogans and graffiti written in December 2008. The present article sets about to interpret the tension between the refusal of the December activists to adhere to a "heritage" and the

tacit adoption of some of the latter's verbal premises. The *histoire-problème* that is posed here is not connected to the casual factors that led to the revolt but to the extent or the way in which the historical past becomes transformed into an element that is important for the outlook or the quest for the identity of this specific movement. Can the rejection of the past be interpreted as a total absence of a revolutionary tradition that produces a movement *ex nihilo*? And how do historical projections by analysts, including juxtapositions, comparisons, and the drawing of parallels with earlier movements play in all this?

"The sixties": reverberating the rejected past

The most important element of appropriation of the past involved slogans and graffiti on the walls. Despite the stated indifference and the supposed rejection of any influences, the past was present in terms of three emblematic moments in the December riots: the December Events of 1944, May 1968, and the Polytechnic Uprising of 1973. At the same time that a giant slogan at the central Klafthmonos Square declared "Fuck May 68: Fight Now" (Figure 1), thus articulating in the most vocal way the rejection of its legacy and reacting to the jubilee literature that the fortieth anniversary had produced, the most famous situationist slogan of '68, "*imagination au pouvoir,*" was written in the neighboring Panepistimiou Street. The graffiti "No God, No Master!," again a slogan that comes from the past, was also widely reproduced, as was "Attention: the police are talking to you through the 8 o'clock news," indicating the growing suspicion of the movement *vis-à-vis* the role of the media. Similarly, a leaflet bore the name "open committee of Athenian énragés" and, in other instances, the voiced slogan was "this is just a beginning," echoing May 1968's "*ce n'est qu'un debut.*" For Guy Debord, in our image culture, "all that once was directly lived has become mere representation" (Debord 1995:2), and this is how the past appears here.

The slogan seen in Salonica "Manson Family: Kill your Parents," on the other hand, departs from the above, as it refers to one of the darkest pages of the American 1960s, that is, the violent murders that took place in Los Angeles in 1969 by Charles Manson's notorious commune. The slogan indicates an unbreachable generational rift and a complete rejection of the family structure. It also connects in a way to the Italian Sessantotto's idea of a generation that "chooses to be orphans" (Passerini 1996:22–36). Even though the latter was formulated in a less violent way, the Oedipal subject matter was similar. Even more important, an unintended reverberation is found in the Greek uprising. One of the most publicized manifestos that circulated during the December events

Figure 1.

read “we used to be invisible.” This brings to mind Nanni Balestrini’s emblematic autobiographic novel *Gli invisibili* (*The Invisibles*), about the 1970s evolution of the extraparliamentary leftist movement in Italy and the embrace of so-called dynamic forms of struggle (Balestrini 2005). “We don’t ask for much, we want it all!” again echoes 1968’s “*Lo vogliamo tutto*” (“We want it all”). It is not a coincidence that Ballestrini’s writings had indeed been translated, published, and widely disseminated in anarchist circles of Athens and Salonica in the past five years (Kornetis 2009b:15). Slogans like “what does not get modified gets destroyed” are also part of this spirit, which might not involve the praxis of a conscious reference to the past but nevertheless evokes it, reverberating one of the most widespread Luxemburgian dilemmas of the global 1968: modification or demolition (Holloway 2002).

References to the Polytechnic

More interesting is the presence or absence of references to the Polytechnic Uprising of 1973. The Polytechnic became the national *"lieu de mémoire"* and symbolic commemorations have become standard practice ever since the democratic consolidation. What is sure is that the 1973 moment came to haunt future generations. Every youth mobilization since then, from the mass student occupations of 1979 to those of 1985, even up until the massive school occupations of the early 1990s and the recent anti-globalization bloc, implicitly or explicitly evoked the Polytechnic as a model. Accordingly, the history of the student movement was seen to be of paramount importance in terms of providing interpretative keys to understanding the contemporary crises in student consciousness. In this logic, the Polytechnic was considered to be "the matrix and sole parameter for analyzing and judging every expression of political radicalism" (Betta and Capussotti 2004). Controversial politician Mimis Androulakis, a student leader during the dictatorship period, has argued that the Polytechnic Generation acts like a group of "vampires." In his view, through its deification, the Polytechnic Generation absorbs younger generations in its own past, rather than allowing them to develop their own genuine rebellions (Androulakis 2004).

This is probably a contributing factor behind the fact that few references were made to the Polytechnic in the 2008 uprising. In a constant attempt to break away from any past, its traces in the activist discourse convey an anti-heroic tone and a rather critical attitude. Contrary to almost every youth movement since 1974 that used the Polytechnic as a point of reference, here we have a conscious attempt to reject the notion that December 2008 was somehow an afterlife of November 1973. In a leaflet bearing the Latin epigraph "*ego te provoco*" and dated 12 December, we read: "the mandarins of harmony, the barons of quiet, law and order call on us to be dialectical. [...] We saw them in May, we saw them in LA and in Brixton, we have been watching them for decades licking the bones of the Polytechnic."[1] Here, apart from the interesting mentioning of the Los Angeles and Brixton riots alongside May 1968, the reference to the appropriation of the Polytechnic legacy implies that it is a rotten one, that it is nothing but a corpse. This reference implies an acute resistance against the cannibalization of a historic tradition.

Nevertheless, there were moments in which there was a direct interpellation of the 1970s in an attempt to show that there is a thread that connects the dictatorship period with the present, even if in rather unpleasant ways. There was graffiti, for example, reading: "In every corner a policeman, the Junta did not end in 1973" («Σε κάθε γωνία υπάρχει

αστυνομία, η χούντα δεν τελείωσε το 73»). This slogan links 2008 to 1973, making an enormous temporal jump but also implying that, after the restoration of democracy, the regime did not cease to be authoritarian. Interestingly, this slogan also got the dates wrong for the sake of rhyme, as the Junta of course collapsed in 1974 and not 1973. But it also reverberates something that remained imprinted in Greek collective memory: that the students of the Polytechnic actually brought down the Colonels in November 1973, a conviction that is entirely inaccurate, as the Junta decided to transfer the power to the politicians for largely unrelated reasons.

The attitude towards the Polytechnic events, nevertheless, is not clear-cut either. Apart from the frequent occupation of its actual premises, which is a ritual full of symbolic meaning, and the occasional graffiti with the most famous slogan of 1973, "Bread-Education-Freedom," one of the alternative information platforms of left-wing students during the 2008 events was a website called "Polytechnic's Calling" («Εδώ Πολυτεχνείο»). This refers directly to the famous cry of the pirate radio station that was set up during the Polytechnic occupation on 14 November 1973. As the description of the website goes, "that was a slogan that gave hope to the Greek people against the oppression of the dictatorial regime. Today we find ourselves confronting the phony democratic regime which is trying to undermine our rights, our lives and our dignity."[2] In short, there is an ambiguous relationship to this particular past and, just like with 1968, its discursive utterance makes this past quite present. Even so, this is quite far from Karamichas's conclusion that the December 2008 events should be seen through the prism of mimesis (of the Polytechnic) that reveals "a particular, self-reproducing, culturally legitimized pattern of youth rebellion in Greece" (Karamichas 2009:291).[3]

The "inheritors"

The last and more widely cited connection with the past—maybe the only connection that was openly welcomed by the majority of activists—has to do with the 1940s and the notorious 33-day-long fighting between the Communist-led resistance group EAM/ELAS and government forces, supported by the British allied troops stationed in Athens. The fighting that started after the massacre of an unarmed crowd during a pro-Communist demonstration resulted in a fierce civil conflict, several thousands of casualties, and a ravaged capital. It ended up with a ceasefire and the Varkiza agreement in January 1945 that called for the complete demobilization of ELAS and is seen as the prelude to the civil war of 1946–1949. These events are commonly known as the "Dekemvriana" (Mazower 1993).

The brochure-analysis that the assembly of the Anti-Authoritarian Solidarity Movement of Salonica published in early January 2009 about December, printed in 2000 samples and distributed in several different cities, bore the title "The December events of our generation" («Τα Δεκεμβριανά της γενιάς μας»). Using the term "Dekemvriana" was a conscious choice that makes an unmistakably direct reference to 1944, associating that traumatic moment in Greek history with the present. Constant references were made to a "civil war" being waged. Young anarchist Elias Nikolaou wrote from Amfissa prison on 19 January 2009, where he was kept under the accusation of firebombing a police station, that "social peace only lives in the imagination of those that cannot understand that reality is characterized by a permanent, [a relentless] civil war, with a revolutionary side that rebels against this democratic monstrosity."[4] A statement distributed by the association of employees in the suburb of Agios Dimitrios in Athens reads in a similar tone: "We are in Civil War: With the fascists, the bankers, the state, the media wishing to see an obedient society."[5] Using the term civil war in the Greek context is something that cannot but invite memories and juxtapositions with past events: the "Dekemvriana" and their aftermath. Similarly, on a widely circulated sticker in mid-December, one could read the motto "In these December events we shall win." Another slogan that drew explicitly on this legacy was "Varkiza is over" («Βάρκιζα τέλος») (Figure 2), again implying that in the present civil conflict the winners would be the radical Left, thus

Figure 2.

proclaiming the 1945 Varkiza agreement to be annulled. All this seems to comply perfectly with Raoul Vaneigem's conclusion that "to construct a present is to correct a past" (Vaneigem 1967).

The idea here is that the trauma is inherited and the legacy of violence can be transmitted across generations, even if in a non-verbal and non-mnemonic way.[6] Alekos Alavanos, a former leader of the left-wing party coalition SY.RI.ZA, elaborated on this idea in an interview that he gave almost a year after the events on the occasion of a recently released film on the Greek Civil War. Alavanos wondered whether or not it was a coincidence that young activists at present used violence in order to bring about political ends, in the same manner in which their "grandfathers" tried to settle their differences with the Greek state in the late 1940s. The journalist who conducted the interview agreed that probably this was part of an ongoing "inter-generational trauma."[7] In the midst of all these indirect references to the revolutionary past as a model and inspiration of the present, the most direct mentioning of a specific moment in the past was made by the immigrants who participated in the events. The "Albanian Immigrants Hub" issued a manifesto, entitled "These Days are Ours Too," in late December that referred to a legacy closer to itself as it saw it, "closer to the silent rage of 18 years": the riots of 2005 in the suburbs of Paris. According to the statement, "for us organized immigrants this is the second French November of 2005" (steki-am.blogspot, comment posted on 15 December 2008). As Peter Bratsis notes, "one of the greatest achievements of the December events are the linkages that have been formed between the current, largely immigrant and very urban, proletariat in Greece and the student, anarchist and other autonomous leftist movements" (Bratsis 2010:194).

The presence of immigrants in the public sphere, and in fact in contestatory action, was not a common phenomenon in Greece. This insurrection created a new rupture, breaking this taboo and signaling the emergence in the public realm of "the *rebellious immigrant*, politicized and public, claiming a political life" (Kalyvas 2010:356). If there is a difference, apart from the more all-encompassing composition of the movement, between the Greek events, the Los Angeles ghetto riots in 1992, and the events in the Parisian *banlieues* in 2005, however, it is that in both of these places—in contrast to Athens—the rioters mostly burned the cars and buildings in their own neighborhoods. The visibility of immigrants in Greece became more accentuated when in late December, Konstantina Kouneva, a Bulgarian immigrant working as a janitor in a cleaning facilities firm and active in the union advocating precarious workers's rights, was attacked with sulphuric acid by unidentified individuals. The movement of solidarity that was created in the wake of the attack and the

relative publicity that the issue attracted were landmark moments (Sotiris 2010, Celik 2010:31). In many ways, the broad transformative promise or potential connected with December did not lead to any alternative institutions being built (or even imagined) but to a large extent was channeled towards consciousness-raising regarding the exploitation of documented and undocumented foreign workers. Last, but not least, the lexical resources of the movement drew on earlier student movements of the past ten years and the abundant clashes between protesters and the police. In fact, many of the most widely circulated slogans of December 2008, including "City that burns, flower that blossoms," were older slogans used in the clashes between university students and police against educational reform in 2006–2007 and were re-activated; they were part of a repertoire that was already being used. In the end, what we see here is "a curious mixture between the [acute] remembrance of the past and the search for the future" (Singer 1972 quoted in Varikas 2002:102). Do the December events have a relation with the past that is not yet recognized? Possibly, as they explicitly recalled it in the mode of direct or indirect citation, even in this time filled by the presence of the "now."

Lost in analysis

The great debate that emerged in the press evolved around the terms "revolt" and "uprising," mainly putting in question whether this was a social movement or not.[8] The question of "what is (and what is not)" a protest movement is again an old one, as is the question whether social movements emerge out of rational calculation or whether they are the product of cultural residues and expressive impulses (Seferiadis 2009). In this framework, connections with past events were very much promoted, drawing parallels or rather juxtaposing the events with 1944, 1965, 1968, 1973, 1985, and 2005. For some reason the debate shifted from the present to the past and their interrelation.

The reference to the "Dekemvriana" became a widely publicized and standard feature of newspapers. Articles with titles like "A New December or a New May '68?" became a standard feature in newspapers. Here is one example: "December of 44, just like December of 2008 started for the same reasons and with the same pretext: the police fired at the crowd. And things became uncontrollable then and now alike. There was only a sparkle that was needed in order for the kiln that was boiling to explode" (Oikonomidis 2008). On the opposite side of the spectrum, political scientists Stathis Kalyvas and Nikos Marantzidis, tried to attack the notion that these were the "new December Events," repudiating the idea of similarities with the revolutionary past. In a highly controversial

article, they argued that the only connection between the past and present "Dekemvriana" was Marx's conclusion that history repeats itself as a farce (Kalyvas, Marantzidis 2008).[9] In fact, most analysts were eager to stress all possible differences, divergences and discrepancies rather than similarities between now and then.

Many analysts called December "a crisis of meaning," others an identity crisis, a nihilist outburst, or a collective psychodrama, and juxtaposed it to the euphoric utopianism of 1968. According to the common attitude, if 1968 was "a revolt with a utopian vision," 2008, just like 2005 in the *banlieues* of Paris, was "just an outburst with no pretence to vision" (Žižek 2008:74). According to this argument, there were no particular demands made by the protesters, who were driven by the desire to become "visible": "there was only an insistence on *recognition*, based on a vague, unarticulated *ressentiment,*" to quote Slavoj Žižek's conclusion regarding the uprising in the French suburbs (Žižek 2008:63). Journalist Elias Kanellis, for example, argued on the occasion of the first "anniversary" since December that, in contrast to May 1968, the riots were an irrational party of destruction for the sake of destruction (Kanellis 2010). Similarly, other analysts described the events along the lines of a "subconscious or conscious invitation to self-destruction [...] reflecting the ultimate in self-negation, self-rejection, and hopelessness," thus echoing Kenneth Clark's analysis (Clark 1970:108). Celebrated author Nanos Valaoritis juxtaposed the Greek slogans with the French ones of 1968: "In France, since the insurrection [of May 68] was inspired by small poetic groups of surrealists, the artistic level was sufficiently high so that the slogans did not become vulgar or ignorant" (Kiousis 2008). Prominent sociologist Constantine Tsoukalas argued that in 1968 in Berkeley, Berlin or Paris, "no hoods appeared, nothing was burnt, no shops were looted" (Tsoukalas 2008). In this kind of analysis we can discern a nostalgia for the past; for veterans Valaoritis and Tsoukalas, *la belle époque* is already over and the past looks much more benign than the present, even in terms of social protest. A similar critique was to be discerned by a group of authors that issued a manifesto against the protesters new "cultural revolution" (Doxiadis et al. 2009).

As the December uprising started with the assassination of Alexis Grigoropoulos, all kinds of movements that emerged after the assassination of individuals were also evoked. Those were the assassination of independent MP Grigoris Lambrakis in May 1963 in Salonica by parastate thugs, that gave rise to a youth movement named after him. Also mentioned was the killing of leftist student leader Sotiris Petroulas in July 1965 during a series of civil unrests as the Greek capital was completely paralyzed and set on fire for more than a month.[10] Composer Mikis

Theodorakis, a protagonist of these earlier events, intervened in those of December 2008 in order to juxtapose the two and stress the fact that, in his view, the current movement lacked legitimacy: "During the July events, in one of the most turbulent times of our history, thousands of youth were going down the streets and we never had the slightest destruction even though we were mourning for two dead, Lambrakis and Petroulas, who died fighting for a better future" (Theodorakis: 2008).[11] The absence of determinant content by the demonstrators in the recent riots made others exclude any kind of affinity to the Polytechnic past.

Connections with the past, however, were also put forward by analysts who argued that the events might not have had affinities with the global contestation of the 1960s or even their local surrogates (1965 and 1973), but that they were the sheer reflection of an anarchist subculture, born in the aftermath of the Polytechnic Uprising, and its domination over contentious politics ever since. Some talked about "the creation of a public discourse of resistance against authority that emerged and became dominant during Greece's transition to democracy in the mid-1970s" (Kalyvas 2008). In fact, many of the mostly used slogans, including "One in the ground, thousands to the struggle" («Ένας στο χώμα, χιλιάδες στον αγώνα»), "Violence against state violence," and the standard soundtrack of activists's actions, "Cops, Pigs, Assassins," are all slogans that were generated in the troubled post-dictatorship period. The eruption of violence in January and February 2009 right after the emergence of a number of terrorist organizations that claimed to be the continuation of December by other means were also seen by commentators as proof that Greece was entering a moment similar to Italy's infamous "years of lead" in the 1970s, namely, a protracted period of political violence with no clear end in sight—what is often termed a "low intensity civil war."

It is accurate to say that in the aftermath of the dictatorship a particular subculture with counter-cultural characteristics emerged around Exarcheia Square, the anarchist quarter of Athens. It is also certain that the 1970s police brutality had lasting effects in people's social imaginary. The late 1970s and early 1980s were indeed years of increased tension with constant clashes between police and rioters. In 1980, protesters Iakovos Koumis and Stamatina Kanellopulou were clubbed to death, and in 1985, the 15-year-old young anarchist Michalis Kaltezas was shot dead by a 25-year old policeman. These were critical moments that led to an ongoing vendetta between the anarchist movement, the extraparliamentary left, and the police. But to deduct from this that there exists a "cycle of protest," according to the term coined by Sydney Tarrow, and to argue that nothing has changed in this particular subculture ever since the 1970s is problematic (Tarrow 1998). First and foremost, because youth

subcultures always have a highly ephemeral character, a nature that cannot survive inalterable for long, let alone for decades. Accordingly, the weakness of this theory is owed to the fact that it provides a static vision of social and historical processes, as if people and culture can live for an indeterminate amount of time in a vacuum, whereby new generations are nothing but past clones, without ideological originality or other differentiations. Moreover, this theory presupposes that people did not deduct any political lessons from the Greek transition to democracy and did not modify their political beliefs and tactics, despite the dramatic changes in the political environment.[12] Analysts used the term "culture of metapolitefsi" in order to describe this negative, disruptive spirit, that traces its roots in a failed transition to democracy (Kalyvas 2009:58–59). Others, like the well-known writer Apostolos Doxiadis, insisted that one should go even further back in time—to the period of the dictatorship itself—in order to understand what he sees as the psychopathological condoning of the youthful violence by people who were themselves students in 1967–1974 (Doxiadis 2009).[13]

A "glocal" movement?

If we look closely at the December activists, however, we are not going to see much of the 1970s subculture. A crucial difference, apart from the obviously different sociopolitical conditions, is that the recent movement was a genuinely polycephalous one, including anarchists, teenagers, immigrants, hooligans, dissolute intellectuals, and unspecified others, across the country, without the central planning and coordination that previous movements involved. Apart from the so-called "known-unknowns," meaning anarchists who routinely repeat a repertoire of clashes with the police on an annual basis, the composition of the protesters changed dramatically with the inclusion of 15-year-old school students in the movement. As Kouki notes, "until the end of December, 800 schools were under occupation and thousands of secondary school pupils were taking to the streets on a daily basis to stage protests against police brutality and unaccountable authority" (Kouki 2009:3). In terms of action repertoire, self-perception, and cultural and ideological references, we can also find clear-cut ruptures rather than continuities with the activist past. In almost the entire period of the events, police stations were almost daily attacked by teenagers, who added in their action repertoire the disruption of television news and theatrical performances. The age component and the fact that 14 and 15-year-olds were the protagonists of this movement is crucial in order to understand the programmatic rejection of past legacies.

An additional element that differentiates this movement from any one in the past is the use of technology; accordingly, we should focus on the changing tropes of protest mobilization, including the introduction of new technologies. This connects with recent mobilizing tendencies, be it in the US concerning the war in Iraq or in Iran after the June 2009 presidential election. The common thread between these heterogeneous movements, which constitute a radical departure from earlier days, is the informal network of communication such as blogs (about 80 of them), and formal ones such as Facebook and the web wunderkind Twitter. These did not just provide alternative information channels but created networks that galvanized and synchronized political activism among this generation of "digital natives." The Facebook group "Alexandros Grigoropoulos," for example, was formed the day after Alexis was killed and attracted thousands of members.

The role of new technologies reduced the distance between the participants and allowed for direct communication, eliminating discrepancies between different groups and creating a common identity, a common micro-culture and an alternative (counter-) public sphere (Della Porta and Diani 2006:221). Technology not only served as a vehicle of communication and co-ordination but also as the embodiment of the very political and organizational goals of the activists. The political relationship with technology and its transformation to an innovative structure for the exchange of ideas was also crucial for linking the bloggers to activists abroad.[14] All this represents what Cleaver calls an opposition to "the official reports of governments and commercial mass media," but also reflects the horizontal, non-hierarchical manner of grassroots organization throughout the events, while the authorities were struggling in vain to identify possible ringleaders (Cleaver 1998:84). As Christos Memos notes, "the role of the internet in the interlinking of previously unrelated groups was immense and allowed the activists to self-organize in a very short period of time" (Memos 2009:227).

Technology ended up defining the specific characteristics of the movement, including the unprecedented simultaneous mobilization of thousands of people in many different parts of the country. Within hours, the political geography of the movement covered all major Greek urban centers, including a number of islands. The fact that 44 cities experienced simultaneous mobilizations transformed the December riots from isolated urban incidents to a national event and from a local to a global, or more fittingly, a "glocal" movement.[15]

Throughout Greece, but especially in Athens and Salonica, slogans were written in different languages, especially French: "*Grèce, puis France, c'est l'insurrection qui vient*" (Figure 3), or "*Grèce Generale*"—a play on words

Figure 3.

of the standard French slogan "*Grève Generale*" (General Strike). A leaflet circulated by an organization entitled "Direct Action" declared emphatically in French "*Nous avons la Rage: Baise la Police*" ("We are enraged: Fuck the Police")[16] (Figure 4). All these slogans were reproduced in various locations in the French capital. Other graffiti reproduced Shepard Fairey's famous André the Giant calling on people to "obey," while a satirical drawing of a person wearing an anti-asphyxia full face mask—a direct statement on the use of chemicals by the police to disperse the crowds—bore the caption "inhale," in English[17] (Figure 5). The most widely circulated slogan in English went "Merry Crisis and a Happy New Fear," playing on the approaching Christmas vacation. Another widely reproduced graffiti bore the face of the avenger of "V for Vendetta" and the English caption "Remember, remember, the 6th of December" (Figure 6). The fact that all these slogans in graffiti and leaflets were written (and reproduced) in French and English was without precedent and demonstrates an attempt of a tacit communication with movements elsewhere—of placing the Greek case within a wider context and paradigm. This is a radical departure from any previous practice.

Indeed, the Greek events seemed to generate a cross-fertilization between different movements and transnational networks (Petropoulou

Figure 4.

2010:220), demonstrating the validity of Doug McAdam's and Dieter Rucht's famous formulation that "protest makers do not have to reinvent the wheel at each place and in each conflict. [...] They often find inspiration elsewhere in the ideas and tactics espoused and practiced by other activists" (McAdam and Rucht 1993:58). Mimicry plays an important role, leading hundreds of youths elsewhere to try to emulate what was going on in Greece in an expression of solidarity and a network of alliances: from Sweden to France, Bulgaria to Spain, the UK to Canada and the United States. Interestingly, in Macedonia and Turkey—two countries with a series of open disputes with Greece—people protested outside the Greek Consulates in support of the demonstrators and created stencils with Alexis's face (Figure 7). As Andreas Kalyvas notes, "this uprising becomes all the more remarkable once we move beyond narrow and indulgent Greco-centric approaches to integrate the domestic with the transnational" (Kalyvas 2010:355).

Figure 5.

On a different level, European elites started worrying that the conditions were ripe for the insurrection to spread. Even if the spillover that the French President Nicolas Sarkozy feared never did materialize, the fact that he postponed an educational reform on these grounds bears a special significance. Interestingly, the phrase used by several French politicians ("all it takes is a spark") was exactly the term used in graffiti in Athens, written in French, calling for "Spark in Athens/Fire in Paris/ It's the insurrection that's coming!" (Kalyvas 2010:355)[18] (Figure 8). Similar metaphors were used by major specialists on social movements, like Isabelle Sommier who rhetorically wondered whether Greece and France were sitting on the same powder keg (Sommier 2008).

Equally important was the influence and impact of the anti-globalization or global justice movement. The fact that the corner of Messologhiou Street in Athens where Alexis was killed became a shrine, and the street plate was changed to "Alexis Grigoropoulos's Street," demonstrates the similarities with yet another tragic incident—the kill-

Figure 6.

ing of Carlo Giuliani in Genoa in 2001 and the re-naming of the piazza Gaetano Alimonda by activists to "Piazza Carlo Giuliani Ragazzo." The affinities go further than this. Many of the tactics used in the Greek uprising, including the fact that a number of banks and public buildings were set ablaze, resemble the violent legacy of the Black Block. Bratsis stresses the fact that "thousands of Greek anarchists […] have trained and been educated through their participation in anti-globalization protests throughout Europe" (Bratsis 2010:195). Apart from their capacity to cause mayhem and disruption, the Black Block were pioneers in using new technologies as a platform of "counter-information"—yet another lesson that activists have drawn from the anti-globalization struggles (Memos 2009:227).[19] The December Events bear the clear imprint of the spirit of Seattle and bring to mind the concept of "multitude," as it was coined by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, according to whom it is very difficult to separate a set of movements and a movement of ideas from one another (Hardt and Negri 2000:60–66).

Figure 7.

Epilogue: re-crusting the past

I have attempted to trace the contested relationship between the December 2008 riots in Greece and the revolutionary past, aiming to promote a discussion on the dynamic relationship between past and present. Even though the activists's repertoire was pretty much removed from the past, their discourse often echoed or reverberated its exact moments. These were picked up and promoted by the media as compelling alter egos, even though it is certain that many activists would probably not share this reading.[20] Intentional or unintentional, conscious or subconscious, the similarities in sloganeering point to some kind of *longue durée* poetics and frames. The past was not necessarily present in the form of the knowledge of history, but in the form of a cultural memory that flashed up at specific moments. According to Cornelius Castoriadis, "no historical action is 'spontaneous' in the sense of arising in a vacuum, of being totally unrelated to its conditions, its environment, *its past*" (Castoriadis 1993).[21] Still, even though the past proves hard to escape, the new December Events and the supposed "inheritors" of earlier traditions did not bring about a riot simulacrum of past clashes. In the end, it was not so much proximity or affinity, but temporal and semantic distance from

Figure 8.

any predecessors that shaped the character of the events. The connecting lines between the local and the international illustrate how the intricate mixture of these elements shaped the character of the events, rendering them a phenomenon with novel characteristics. As Andreas Kalyvas notes, "the foreign becomes the decisive factor, the central signifier for a fuller understanding of the unrests" (Kalyvas 2010:356).

The short-lived legacy of the new December Events has already suffered several setbacks, however. The first one was during the events themselves, when several shops were looted by protesters and when incidents such as the accidental burning of the prestigious Library of International Studies alienated parts of the populace. The only political party that directly supported the protesters, SY.RI.ZA, saw its percentages in the polls fall from an estimated 15% to just over 3%, showing that by the third week, the protesters had lost touch with society as a whole. Finally, the emergence of a new generation of terrorists claiming to avenge Alexis's death in early January 2009 aggravated the situation. The violence that accompanied the one-year anniversary since the events in December 2009—including the bullying of the dean of the University of Athens—sealed these negative developments. Last, but not least, in December 2008, one of the most popular slogans was "You are talking about glass windows, we are talking about lives," again, a slogan that had been used before. This phrase epitomized the self-righteousness

on the side of the activists, enraged for the loss of an innocent life.[22] However, when on 5 May 2010 three persons suffocated to death when the bank they were working in at the centre of Athens was firebombed by unidentified individuals during the anti-austerity strikes, hardly any sentimentality of the kind was expressed by non-traditional social actors, nor did any spontaneous protest emerge. Even though this incident is not a direct afterlife of December, the contrast between these landmark moments deserves to be stressed.

In a time of crisis and transformation in which many foresee social explosions resulting from the austerity measures that are imposed in order to deal with the problems of the Greek economy, December 2008 might be recovered by future movements and act itself as a point of reference, definitely replacing the "heroic" but distant 1960s and 1970s.

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NOTES

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[1]You can read the entire text in http://katalipsiasoee.blogspot.com/2008/12/blog-post_4576.html.

[2]http://www.edopolytexneio.org/wiki/ Εδώ_Πολυτεχνείο—Edo_Polytexneio:Σχετικά.

[3]An interesting view concerning the possible linkages between the Polytechnic and the "December Events" was made by *poète chansonnier* Dionysis Savvopoulos, who referred to the Polytechnic as a myth of origins. Also worth mentioning is his counterfactual assertion that "if Alexis Grigoropoulos had not been killed next to the Polytechnic but somewhere in Kifissia or Nea Ionia, [...] December would not have been as tense and the mobilization of the people, alas, would not have been so great" (Liavas 2009:7).

[4]Translated and reproduced in http://greeceriots.blogspot.com/2009/02/letter-from-greek-anarchist-ilias.html.

[5]Translated and reproduced in http://www.occupiedlondon.org/blog/2008/12/12/we-are-in-civil-war-with-the-fascists-the-bankers-the-state-the-media-wishing-to-see-an-obedient-society.

[6]This idea can be found also in Elias Maglinis's controversial novel *The Interrogation.* The novel's protagonist was arrested by the military police during the dictatorship and suffered torture, including sexual abuse—about which he maintains an unfailing silence. His 30-year-old daughter is clearly haunted by her father's experiences, not because she

lived them or has direct access to them, but because the trauma is, in some sense, inherited (Maglinis 2008).

[7] Alekos Alavanos interviewed by Maria Choukli. See “Ο Αλέκος Αλαβάνος από το Α ως το Ω” [Alekos Alavanos from A to Z] http://www.protagon.gr/Default.aspx?tabid=444&VideoId=1875.

[8] See Kornetis 2009a. Parts of this debate were echoed in a recent roundtable discussion in which Greek historians opined on the crisis (21 January 2010). The statement by historian Vassilis Kremmydas, “I would call it an outbreak, an uprising, a rising, but not a ‘revolt,’” is telling (Kremmydas et al. 2010:5).

[9] An elaboration of the idea of the December events as a farce was made by Marantzidis in an article in *Le Monde* (Marantzidis 2009).

[10] Interestingly, during the tragic events of 5 May 2010 that followed the largest demonstration that took place in the country since 1974, three people died on the other corner from where Petroulas was killed. Flamboyant left-wing MP Grigoris Psarianos commented on the symbolic dimensions of this coincidence in a speech in the Greek Parliament on 6 May 2010.

[11] Theodorakis’s point regarding the absence of destruction in 1965 is entirely inaccurate and not substantiated by the facts.

[12] For a detailed analysis of the theory concerning political lessons regarding the authoritarian past, see Bermeo (1992).

[13] References to supposed historical analogies were also made by political psychologist Thanos Lipovats (“the acceptance of such acts of violence led and lead to totalitarianism and the gulag”), former US diplomat Brady Kiesling (“the Greek Krystallnacht”), and Cambridge historian Paul Cartledge (“the events refer to Thucydides’ concept of ‘stasis’”). See Paraskevas Matalas’s intervention in Kremmydas et al. (2010:16).

[14] The most well-known grassroots, non-commercial information platform, *Indymedia*, defines itself as a “collective of independent media organizations and hundreds of journalists offering grassroots, non-corporate coverage.” See www.indymedia.org/nl. An alternative platform similar to *Indymedia* in Greece is *Indygr* (http://indy.gr).

[15] For an elaboration of this concept see Robertson (1995).

[16] Photos courtesy of Kyriakopoulos and Gourgouris (2009).

[17] Photos courtesy of Kyriakopoulos and Gourgouris (2009).

[18] See for example the statement by former socialist minister Laurent Fabius in Chloé Leprince, “*La France peut-elle s’embraser comme la Grèce*?” *Rue 89* 11 December 2008.

[19] Also see an overview of the Black Block’s role during the G8 Summit in Genoa in 2001 in Lucarelli (2009:21–22).

[20] As Umberto Eco has argued, there is never a single message uniquely encoded in a text, but several messages as decoded by different readers endowed with different “intertextual encycopledias” (Eco 1979:5).

[21] My emphasis. Here we should add Charles Tilly’s famous theory according to which no social movement is entirely spontaneous but depends on specific resources and political opportunities. See Tilly (1978).

[22] See also the fake dialogue «Πέθανε ένας άνθρωπος Κώστα» (“A human has died Kosta”), reproduced in Kyriakopoulos and Gourgouris (2009).

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