

The Return of Street Politics?

Essays on the December Riots in Greece

Edited by Spyros Economides & Vassilis Monastiriotis

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December 8 2008, riots in Athens, damaged bank at the city centre.

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Preface

In early December 2008 Athens, and subsequently a number of other Greek cities, were gripped by a series of demonstrations and riots which shocked Greeks, and many beyond. What was more shocking than the mere eruption of the demonstrations was their duration, their spread throughout Greece and the fact that they were accompanied by acts of looting, violence and ultimately terrorism. Ostensibly, the cause of these mass and violent protests was the shooting of teenager Alexis Grigoropoulos, by a trigger-happy police officer. But what quickly became apparent was that the demonstrations that ensued, both the violent and the more peaceful ones, were more of a manifestation of a longer-term sense of frustration on the part of elements of Greek society, especially the youth, than simply a short-term feeling of outrage at the killing of a school-age child.

The main grievances of the demonstrators were directed at a political system and state behaviour which Greek youths believed had let them down. This was not only about reform of higher education or youth unemployment and dim job prospects. It included anger directed against the perceived incapacity and unwillingness of the established political parties to provide change and

reform; endemic corruption throughout the political and judicial system; an inadequate police force; and many other factors.

The government of the day, ‘the state’, as well as the police force were the initial targets. But rapidly, banks and other big businesses were seen as legitimate targets for the demonstrators. Among the demonstrators were also a significant representation of Greece’s anarchist and extreme left movements, quick to turn the situation to their advantage and refocus the riots into an anti-establishment, anti-systemic, anti-capitalist movement. This in turn unleashed greater levels of violence not only against the police but also against public and private property. Combined with the initial decision for the police to adopt an ‘observer’ approach to the demonstrations, partly as a means to avoid the further spread of violence, this dynamic soon moved from destruction into looting.

With the inability of the mainstream parties to understand and relate to the demonstrations – and with the obvious failure of the state institutions (including the police) to respond to and control the situation – for at least a short period of time in December 2008 it seemed as if there was going to be no end to the violence and discontent. Indeed, the protests continued for many weeks, now including demonstrations organised by trade unions, pensioners and other social groups. And when the scale and force of the demonstrations started subsiding, a new wave of guerrilla-style attacks, aimed at the police as well as at various businesses, political offices and other institutions, started emerging. *Politics, it appeared, had returned to the streets* – and away from the Parliament, outside which stood twice the largest burning Christmas tree in Europe.

Besides the obvious issues that these events raise – about governance, security and social justice among others – the ‘December Riots’ also raise wider questions that are vital to understanding the future of Greek politics and society. And while the immediate causes of the demonstrations are clear,

the deeper underlying issues remain still unfocused. What social pathologies and institutional incapacities allowed the deep causes of these events to remain subdued until recently – and to come to the surface so violently and so abruptly in December 2008? Are the dynamics underpinning them unique to Greece or do they form part of a broader social malaise in the European context? Do they represent a social transformation that has already taken place – perhaps unnoticed by the mainstream institutions, including the political elites and the media? Do they signify a permanent disconnect between mainstream politics and society (“the public”)? And what will be the mark that these events will leave on the conduct of mainstream politics and on the political process more generally in Greece? Will they ultimately lead to a transformation of political parties (or of the political system more broadly) and of processes of social representation and engagement? How will they shape the social and political horizon in the years to come?

The Hellenic Observatory of the London School of Economics wants to encourage a broad and open dialogue on these issues. One of the main ambitions of the Observatory is to act as a facilitator for the exchange of ideas and views. We encourage constructive research and debate on issues relating to contemporary Greece in a frank and open manner. As such we invited a group of analysts and commentators, academics and journalists, to share their views with us and you so as to create a basis for opening such a dialogue. We encouraged the authors to think long-term and to examine the deep roots of what happened in December. Our reason for initiating this exchange is not ideologically or politically driven: we would like to encourage a transparent debate to achieve a better understanding of the December events in Greece. The return of this form of street politics has certainly left its mark on contemporary Greece and may also do so in broader European terms.

The editors would like to thank all the contributors for their co-operation in putting together this edition. We would especially like to thank Professor Nikos Chrostodoulakis who, while at the Hellenic Observatory as National Bank of Greece Senior Research Fellow, encouraged us and assisted us in drafting the parameters of the issues to be addressed and contributors to be approached.

Spyros Economides
Vassilis Monastiriotis

London, April 2009.

1

Street Protests in ‘Une Société Bloquée’

Kevin Featherstone, *Professor, London School of Economics, UK*

The global economic crisis that began in 2008 was slow to reach Greece. The riots that erupted in Athens in December had causes that stemmed largely from specifically Greek factors. As such, they cannot easily be taken as the harbinger of popular protest across Western economies in crisis. They do, however, raise important questions about governance and cohesion in Greek society that can be expected to linger for the foreseeable future. The response will indicate much about the capacity of Greek society to engage in serious reform.

The tragic shooting of a 15-year old schoolboy unleashed the most widespread violent protests of the *Metapolitefsi* (Greece post-1974). The protests soon questioned the legitimacy and effectiveness of the state authorities. The popular protests led many schoolchildren to engage in strike action, with the connivance of at least some of their teachers. Children,

some not yet in their teens, were convinced the authorities were lying and were having their first experience of industrial-style unrest.

These uncontrollable events were followed by a spate of small-scale terrorist attacks across Greece. Cash machines were wrecked, cars smashed, and bombs placed outside banks and police stations. After the success in arresting the 'November 17' (N17) terrorist group some years earlier, it seemed anarchist protests were back.

Alongside a sociological agenda of alienation and threat, came a 'Hollywood' escapade that was lifted right out of a joke book with the escape from a maximum security prison of Vassilis Paleokostas. The sense of farce was compounded by the fact that he had escaped in exactly the same way – climbing a ladder to an overhead helicopter - less than two years previously. The state authorities were humiliated.

Social breakdown was matched by a government in disarray. The political fallout began with a Cabinet reshuffle and a lead in the polls for PASOK, the main opposition party, though perhaps not big enough to overcome the earlier seepage of its own voters to fringe parties. Public opinion had turned, though it remained indecisive: Prime Minister, Costas Karamanlis, still remained more popular than PASOK's George Papandreou.

The immediate outcome of these events has to be placed in the context of the deeper social tensions within Greece that pre-date them. The riots unleashed a pent-up frustration of the youth over the ineptitude and indiscipline of the police. This same group had parallel grievances over the lack of jobs, the changed employment contracts, and low incomes on offer to them. This was probably the first generation of the *Metapolitefsi* to face worse economic prospects than its predecessors.

Yet, these protests connected with a sense of malaise in wider society. The 'system' was not delivering opportunity to the young, but also it was failing in other respects. The political landscape had for some time been formed by the conflicting, and often irreconcilable, demands of various social groups, at least some of which had the power to slow or even veto change. At the political apex was a system of government that lacked structural power and efficiency. Government purpose has been repeatedly undermined by the conflicting needs of clientelism and, often also, the distractions of corruption. Ministers intent on serious reform face political isolation as other interests come into play. At the same time, the voice of the unions has been dominated by the interests of workers in the public sector: the very part of the system most often attacked for its inefficiency and corruption. On the other side, the economy has very few large firms and a myriad of small enterprises. Traditionally, many large firms have opted for social peace in the context of sustained barriers to market entry. The constituency for liberal economic reform has been exceptionally small and shallow.

Thus, Greece has exhibited low reform capacity on a long-term basis. The explosion of protest in December 2008 added an intense focus on the policing functions of the state to a condition of unmet economic and social demands. A system that cannot process competing social demands to satisfy rising expectations is a blocked society. The latter exhibits a party system lacking loyalty and support; a system of interest mediation that tends towards conflict and stalemate on key issues; and a governmental structure that lacks the ability to sustain singularity of purpose and implementational strength. In this context, a sudden focus on an underlying area of frustration can unleash a popular explosion with which the system is barely able to cope. At the same time, the political and social conditions – with their inherent conflicts and contradictions - make it difficult for the protesters to establish a 'hegemonic' agenda. Society is not only conflictual, but also blocked.

Greece at the start of 2009 seemed to approximate these conditions in important ways. The immediate social crisis had abated, but the mood was of unprecedented gloom and uncertainty. Public debate awaited the next national elections, with an assumption that they could redress the situation. Yet, whether this proved so would depend on the more fundamental conditions highlighted above being tackled.

2

The New Politics of the New Century

Othon Anastasakis, *Director of SEESOX, University of Oxford, UK*

In December 2008, Greece surprised the world with the intensity of its youth rioting and the extent of destruction of property in various Greek cities. For this state of affairs there have been many explanations and significant degree of blame. The first natural target of these demonstrations was the police, blamed for its brutality, but also its incompetence and inability to protect the citizens from the generalised anarchy that prevailed. The second target was the government for its inability to give proper guidance to its security forces, but also for a more general lack of leadership. The other political parties did not escape criticism either, blamed for their lack of political alternatives and their ineffective opposition. The education system has been criticised for being inefficient, disconnected with current needs and uncompetitive in the international market, creating big numbers of under- or un-employed graduates. As a matter of fact, the state of education has been one of the most sensitive matters and the recent

attempts by the government to introduce reform met with fierce resistance from students.

In the background, lies the current economic crisis which is deep and has affected the people's mood, and their pockets. People's anger has been directed towards the government for its inadequate economic policies but also the bankers for their share in the current financial crunch. For the more internationally minded, the blame lies with the uncontrollable forces of global capitalism which result in economic inequality, environmental disasters, illegitimate international military interventions and the weakening of nation states and governments. Finally seen from a conspiratorial perspective, not uncommon in Greek minds, the blame lies with external agents and secret forces, who instigate disorder and plot against Greece's national interests.

The list of grievances is long and some of the arguments are more convincing than others. It is, however, important to note that these issues have been in the public domain long before the December 2008 riots and reflect the general mood of frustration and dissatisfaction in the country. The public climate in Greece has been one of alienation from the political establishment, scepticism towards reform (of the pension system, higher education, employment policies, agricultural sector etc.), and disdain towards instances of political corruption. Public demonstrations, and the violence attached to them, have become a regular pattern in Greek politics. When demonstrations take place in Greece, and particularly in Athens, a parallel network of 'professional rioters' appear on the scene and test their ability to cause havoc. The December riots were particularly severe, widespread and destructive because they started with a very provocative trigger i.e., the shooting of an upper-middle class pupil by police forces, which brought about a big reaction from the most sensitive, protected and 'adored' part of the society i.e., the pupils (and was handled in the most ill-conceived and

disorientated way by the police and the government, which allowed ample space for the violent rioters to destroy and loot).

The December 2008 riots, the ones preceding them and the ones that follow, signify two interesting phenomena for Greek (and international) politics. First, 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', and second, the ideological message of these protests and unrest is multi-thematic and is addressed to different audiences.

Democratic politics are becoming more direct and protest politics are beginning to gain ground over the more traditional forms of political participation, i.e., electoral politics, party membership, trade unionism, strikes etc. These conventional democratic channels are not convincing enough to represent the different demands because they are seen as corrupt, inefficient and out of date. People do not feel that by changing their national governments they will make any significant difference. Apart from mistrusting politicians, they realise that real power of decision has been transferred to regional and global levels, the European Union or global international institutions, outside and beyond national borders. In that sense, Greece, and its violent reaction to the crisis, is not a uniquely national phenomenon, it can occur and, indeed, happens in many other countries that are going through similar crises.

Demonstrations have always been part of Greek culture and there have been plenty of riots in the past on issues that could unite large groups of individuals and social classes. Yet, in most of these cases popular reaction to the political process was mono-thematic and concrete. During the 1960s, popular reaction attacked the authoritarian state, its divisive policies and its one-sided, exclusionary ideology; during the 1970s, the popular demand was for the democratisation and the opening of the political system, the fight against the legacy of the Greek civil war and the military junta; during the

1980s, the popular claim was for the redistribution of the national product and the inclusion of social and political forces that had been excluded for long; during the 1990s, the main messages were the ‘modernisation’ of the Greek economy and society, the inclusion of Greece into the single currency and the projection of the country as a regional power in South East Europe.

The first decade of the 21st century has multiple messages to deliver, and a lot of anger to channel; there are many demands addressed at both national governments and international global agencies. Greek popular reaction is targeting political corruption, economic crisis, the state for its inefficiency and its poor capacity to deliver, the police for its brutality and incompetence, the bankers for their financial responsibility, the European Union for imposing unpopular reforms, and globalisation for the socio-economic inequality and the world injustices that it brings. Paradoxically, these protesters and ‘professional rioters’ who fight against globalisation are also gaining global appeal for their anti-capitalist, anti-global, even anarchist message in the context of global protest politics.

3

The Society of Aphasia and the Juvenile Rage

Olympios Dafermos, *Advisor at the Pedagogic Institute, Greece*

So much juvenile rage! So much indignation and the adult society has still to consider the causes of this panhellenic revolt, to examine its development and the framework within which the rage and despair of the children was born.

Universal Malfunction of Institutions

Wherever young people turn they face emptiness. The main objectives today are injudicious consumerism, the pretence, the menacing threat of television and the acquisition of power and wealth. Creative people and those who work arduously are neither acknowledged nor remunerated. Today's commercialised society emphasises the present, moving forward with no plans, values, ideologies, solidarity, collective actions or prospects.

The average young person is forced to study in a miserable school, long-lasting and boring, which ignores contemporary theories of learning and new educational methods. Simultaneously he is forced to attend tutorial courses if he wants to continue his studies at university level. During his adolescence he is forced to work hard all day long. He is not given any time to fall in love, to see and experience the world. He has no time to play, no time to waste, in order to find himself, to think and to organise his own sense. If he is good at learning by heart he will enter higher education, where yet another shock awaits. The university, in crisis, augments his confusion rather than aiding him in his personal organisation.

Upon his graduation, he faces unemployment, partial or seasonal employment, derisory wages, uninsured work, companies that rent workers, and labour insecurity, in general. The private sector treats youth as 'expendable products'.

In the political firmament the situation is worse still: scandals, corruption and political impotence. The politicians are anything but exemplary. Without positions and programmes they seek to achieve power by all means.

Exclusively benefiting professional politicians and affiliated parties, the political system finds itself in complete crisis. 'Relatives' and *Vatopedio*, looting of public fortune, political spin, lack of political dialogue, and absence of substance or responsibility are the cause and, ironically, the only remnant of the system.

In the state mechanism, corruption, clientelism, bureaucracy and inefficiency prevail. Public services treat the youth contemptuously: often they are required to be accompanied by their parents when carrying out bureaucratic matters.

Despite political and moral decline there is no cry of distress from the intellectual leadership. There are no intellectuals today to fundamentally criticise the authorities, to demonstrate a people-centred and socially judicial path. Those who are not pursuing their fifteen minutes of fame are using up their energy on EU funded projects. There are exceptions, but they are few and far between and the media does not consider them worthy of attention

The judicial system and the church also showed a side similar to that of politicians: corruption, cynical authoritarianism, a lack of social and ethical or moral sensitivity. Finally the media are firmly embedded to the power establishment that supports it directly and indirectly.

Neoliberal politics function in an unregulated way without promising anything to the dominating parties. They attack the workers and the weakest, and are in need of repressive mechanisms. It is no coincidence that the peremptory police officers are rarely punished. The impunity and the authoritarian education are the producers of the audacious murderers, like those of Alexis Grigoropoulos, the torturers of immigrants etc.

The Left Wing

Today's Left Wing is in complete crisis from all angles. This does not allow it to constitute a vision or to conceive new movements, much less express them. This crisis led the traditional European Socialist parties to adopt a neo-liberalistic policy, resulting from:

- a) the collapse of Soviet regimes, which indicated universal defeat across the Left Wing;
- b) globalisation, which restricts the interventionist capacity of the state both economically and legislatively;
- c) the introduction of new technologies in production, which decreased the weight of the working class in the economy and in employment relations.

Although SYRIZA is receptive, it is unable to express the movement by giving content and solutions for its shortcomings. By helping it to form its own demands and slogans, it could lead to an action and behaviour without antisocial characteristics, as it is the case now.

The Communist Party of Greece (KKE) does not exercise Opposition. It mainly attacks SYRIZA and PASOK apprehending/fearing that they will absorb its voters. In this way it lines up with the New Democracy Government, while often its positions coincide with the reactionary views of parties that do not belong to the left. Its presence and its actions do not influence the country's politics. Possessed from existential anxiety, it is found in the margin of political life, entrenched in Stalinism and its authoritarian organisation. Although its military type demonstrations may not bring about trouble, they do not constitute a political fact. The fact that it does not begin with its own initiative is interpreted by conspiracy theories. Consequently, it cannot comprehend the autonomous juvenile movement of December. Even more, it cannot express it, which leads it to another type of action and behaviour. In fact, this movement threatens the Communist Party (KKE) and its conservative policy.

The Movement

The young people, who attempt to see and experience the world and face the void, have been mobilised for years through demonstrations, occupations and demands. The state and society are ignorant; the system legislates by default and against them. The main concern of adults is their convenience, even at the expense of the future of the country and of young people.

Harsh neo-liberal policy, the decay and the faceless left create a gloomy present and a dangerous future. The average young person faces, beyond the impasse of life, the impasse of the crisis of ideologies, values and visions.

For these reasons, the movement of the youth was expressed blindly, with rage and sometimes anti-socially, without demands and slogans; destroying, symbolically, the world of adults.

All young people, and those that wear hoods, were produced by the society of the adults. They are not monsters, neither 'spoiled', nor criminals, but rather hypersensitive individuals, notably hurt from the world of adults, from which they have not received love, acceptance and respect. The cold blooded killing of Alexis Grigoropoulos threatened their physical existence; hence the explosion and the rage towards the callus authorities. This is what they received, this is what they return. We are the moral perpetrators.

Let us admit that today, while the society of adults trails in the wake of events, young people resist. They destroy, which is why we disagree with them. But doesn't neo-liberalism, and its international policies, cause destruction? Crude military interventions, the legitimacy of tortures, looting of the countries of the South, increase in the number of children that die from hunger, increase in the number of the 'nouveau-poor' – a beastly situation. This is the framework within which the political power functions in our country. **According to the action, therefore, the reaction.**

4

[Greek riots 2008:] - A Mobile Tiananmen

Akis Gavriilidis, *Translator - PhD in Law Philosophy*

The first error we must avoid when trying to make sense of the riots that shook Greece in December 2008 is to explain them away as an ‘emotional outburst of the youth’, or as ‘blind violence with no political content’. Such views were expressed by many Greek analysts and politicians and not only from the mainstream. For example an article entitled ‘The Politics of Speechlessness’ appeared in *Avgi* on 1 March 2009.

In contrast, I maintain that this movement was extremely *eloquent* and had everything to do with *communication*. Admittedly not in the Habermasian sense, but at least in two other senses. Firstly, rioters used modern technologies of communication, in ways that outwitted the state’s archaic mechanisms. The coordination of high school students, when they simultaneously attacked about 45 police stations all over Greece without any central leading body, was a masterful display of organisational skills

desperately lacking from most state agencies. Secondly, the riots themselves constituted a statement (or several statements); this statement was a *performative one*, in so far as its subject did not pre-exist its formulation, but was produced by the very act of enunciation.

At the same time, this subject is just as much a *non-subject* (if by 'subject' we understand a unified and accountable entity). It is a *multiple* subject: it 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. Unlike the traditional leftist labour and/or anti-colonial movements of the 20th century (the century of Fordism and imperialism), these people did not mobilise to demand higher salaries, better education, or national independence and sovereignty. The object, as well as the tool, of their struggle was not just communication but *life itself*. As capital turns into sources of profit, the communicative, linguistic and affective skills of people, their very mobility, these same skills increasingly become also tools of resistance¹.

This subject is the *multitude*.

According to the traditional Marxian scheme of *revolution*, within human societies certain productive forces keep accumulating for some while, until a moment comes when these forces cannot be contained any more in the existing framework of production relationships which used to govern them until then. So revolution is the eruption of these forces who could not find expression in the old forms.

One could usefully try to construe this movement in terms of Marx's concept, but with at least one differentiation: this eruption of the new forces

¹ Paulo Virno 2004, *A Grammar of the Multitude. For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, Semiotext(e), available at <http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcmultitude3.htm> (March 2009).

onto the scene did not consist of taking control of state power, but only in *subtracting oneself* from its control. It was an *exodus from established authority*, both moral and intellectual, and a performance of this new subjectivity, an affirmation of its autonomous existence and dignity. The multitude did not come up with a new project alternatively to organise the social totality and replace the old framework; it only demonstrated, albeit temporarily, its superiority to it.

Accordingly, we could apply to it, and to the embarrassment it caused to established politicians and analysts, some words written by Giorgio Agamben in respect of the Tiananmen square sit-in:

‘What was most striking about the demonstrations of the Chinese May was the relative absence of determinate contents in their demands (...). In the final instance the State can recognise any claim for identity –even that of a State identity within the State (...). What the State cannot tolerate in any way, however, is that the singularities form a community without affirming an identity that humans co-belong without any representable condition of belonging. For the State, therefore, what is important is never the singularity as such, but only its inclusion in some identity, whatever identity (but the possibility of the *whatever* itself being taken up without an identity is a threat the State cannot come to terms with)’².

A marker of this affirmation (and, at the same time, undermining) of identity, was the ‘social poetics’³ concerning the term *koukouloforoi* [‘the hooded ones’], as it was used – and re-contextualised – during the events.

This poetics first of all reappropriated – through its parody – an already existing pejorative term and gave it a new, positive meaning, made of it a source of pride rather than shame – much in the same way as gays did with the term *queer*.

² *The Coming Community*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, London, 2003, pp. 84-85.

³ Michael Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-state*, New York - London: Routledge, December, 2004 (2nd edition), p. 183 ff.

But then, also, this new object of identification is *the lack of identity itself*, the void, as the *koukouloforos* has no identifiable face – he is precisely ‘taking up the whatever as an identity’.

Furthermore, the Greek rioters did not limit themselves to camping on a square for several days, as the Chinese students did; rather, they staged a *nomadic-itinerant Tiananmen*. Protestors repeatedly stormed Syntagma square, then retreated, came back again, appeared in other neighbourhoods – and towns – where no demonstrations had ever taken place.

This element of *mobility*, which was a weapon for this movement, was also one of its *reasons*. Mobility, both in the physical and in the mental sense, contributed greatly to the accumulation of intellectual and affective capacities with the younger generation. As it did to their self-esteem, and to their subsequent refusal to be governed and told what to do by people they wouldn’t accept as their superiors who know better – including journalists, university professors, and state and party leaders⁴. Indeed, due to their contact with diverse experiences (ranging from the Erasmus programme to the European Social Forum held in Athens in 2005), which went beyond the relative *insulation* under which Greek society had lived for many decades, this generation were able to break with the ‘cultural intimacy’ of their society.

One possible translation of ‘cultural intimacy’ is that ‘for certain things we don’t ask questions’. One of these things was *the impunity of policemen*, and the ungrievability of the deaths that they induce⁵. Of this idea, the movement constituted the performative rejection.

⁴ In this sense, it is totally wrong to link these events to the ‘domination of parties’ [kommatikokratia] and the ‘weakness of the civil society’, as Nikos Mouzelis did (*To Vima*, 21 December 2008) – see also chapter 9 in this volume.

⁵ Judith Butler, *Prekarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*, Verso, London - New York 2006.

But, more deeply, one of the things that went without saying, that the youth were expected to take for granted as a part of this tacit social contract, concerned *life itself*, not death. The definition of a good life, as implied in the framework of Greek cultural intimacy, consisted of the following scenario: live with your parents until you get a degree – get a good job – earn money – create a family – do consumption/shopping – have your kids live with you until they get a degree, and over again.

With this movement, a large part of Greek – and also migrant – youth expressed an anxiety before the possibility not of *missing* this life style, but precisely of *getting it*: they declared that this is *not* what they perceive as a meaningful life, and that they are not willing to sacrifice all their vital energy in order just to achieve it.

This refusal of the ‘family secret’ can only be beneficial, as it introduces into the public domain the possibility of a *discussion*. Instead for the logic of a self-evident, tautological ‘one way’, it poses again the idea that several different answers are thinkable, even necessary, and that we need to reflect and politically decide which one to choose and how best to organise our common existence.

In short, it opens the way to *antagonism*, hence to *democracy*.

5

Warped Institutions, Political Failure and Social Guilt

Alexis Kalokerinos, *Associate Professor, University of Crete, Greece*

As I write these lines, two months have passed since the killing of fifteen-year-old Alexandros Grigoropoulos and the outbreak of riots in Athens and other Greek cities. Once the Christmas tree in the Greek capital's Constitution Square had been set alight, the 'uprising' went on vacation, promising to return at the 'pan-educational' rally on 9 January 2009. That led to a number of demonstrations, and sit-ins at a number of schools and universities were resumed, but within approximately three weeks no educational institution remained under occupation. At the same time, terrorist organisations, claiming urban guerrilla status, have made sporadic appearances. Meanwhile, although European Union authorities have initiated the Excessive Deficit Procedure (EPD) against Greece and tough measures aimed at curbing the deficit are in the offing, the workers already suffering and expected to bear the brunt of the global financial crisis have not downed tools or taken to the streets.

Thus far, those who predicted that the murder of Grigoropoulos would spark off a new civil war in Greece have been proved wrong. The main tangible result of the 'uprising' on the political level has been a shift in power in the parliamentary left. The Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) has lost approximately one third of the strength it had in opinion polls prior to the events, dropping to below 7% and behind the Greek Communist Party (KKE) which, in the midst of the crisis, made good of the opportunity to accuse the Coalition of 'pandering to the anarchists'.

To properly assess public opinion and the stance of the pupils and students who took part in the events, we need to bear in mind certain features of Greek society, its economy and institutions. Greece is characterised by a bloated public sector and a stunted, heavily state-dependent free market. The country's productivity lag is reflected in its high balance of payments deficit (over 14% of GDP in 2008). The private sector is based mainly on activities generating instant return (construction, shipping and tourism). A large part of all economic activity (perhaps equalling 45% of the legitimate economy) is hidden and thus evades taxation, which mainly derives from waged labour. Society is organised along the lines of pressure groups, but trade unionism is controlled by the political parties and only attracts low participation rates. In sum, the political system has a peculiar stranglehold on what is a highly fragmented society. The ruling political class hands out public sector appointments and bargains with social groups over the granting of 'privileges' and the selective implementation of laws on issues of concern to them. Public discourse is dominated by a left-leaning rhetoric that cuts across the entire political spectrum. Any attempt to alter the status quo is perceived as undermining public goods such as education and social security, not least by those who admit that the current system is not really providing such goods.

In broad terms, Greek society is deeply ideologised in the Marxist/Althusserian sense, i.e., in terms of the distance between consciousness and practice. This was painfully apparent during the events of December 2008: politicians, intellectuals and ordinary people concurred that they had ‘deprived their children of their future’. The loudest voice at the time was the voice of guilt. The aforesaid admission would have been interesting had it not been of maximum idealistic content and minimum practical value. Not least because the very same society, though so prone to rhetorical mortification, had only recently failed to hold an effective dialogue on the irrational social security system, a question which hinges on the very issue of intergenerational solidarity. Similarly, society appears reluctant to enter into constructive dialogue over reforming the education system, which is one of the greatest failures of the contemporary Greek state.

The Greek education system is geared in its entirety towards the ‘panhellenic’ university entrance examinations, yet access to higher education is contingent on attending a parallel system of private crammers. In other words, the system suffers from what is in effect duplication. Pupils go through the motions of learning at state school and are then supposedly educated at private afternoon school, though in essence they are merely being drilled in specialist techniques to solve the riddles they are to face in the panhellenic exams. This perverse system lacks meaning, and when experienced by pupils merely provides them with additional reasons to demand personal free time: during the unrest in December 2008, pupils stayed away from school in the morning, but continued to attend afternoon lessons as normal.

In turn, Greek universities are hidebound by obsessions and political manipulation. ‘Democratic rule’ within them is instituted via ‘co-administration’ by academics and party-affiliated student union groups, whose support is required in electing university authorities. In practice, political parties in Greece use universities as a breeding ground for high

ranking officials. To attract young talent they offer legislated power in the form of 'co-administration'. This recruitment scheme, which includes practical exercise in all kinds of negotiation, has proved effective for political parties but disastrous for universities. Composed in this manner, the university community is supposedly self-governing with regard to basic issues such as the free dissemination of ideas and the enforcement of laws from the outside world, including the non-use of physical violence on campus.

On the fringes of this same system are those smaller groupings which refuse to participate in 'co-administration' but which, in accordance with their own interpretation of university democracy, are vociferous in demanding 'all power to student assemblies'. Manifestations of the non-parliamentary left and part of the parliamentary left exploit the twisted logic inherent in the system. Since the non-use of violence on Greek university campuses is a matter of consent and self-regulation, they deny all others the right to regulate. Being opposed to the 'system' in general, the limits to this practice on and off campus are not easily discernible. By the same token, the violent so-called leftist activism that has grown up and spread from university institutions nationwide has its roots in fundamental structural flaws in the higher education system and its close ties to the political system, more particularly in the terms on which the former reproduces the latter.

In conclusion, I believe that the December 'uprising' sprang from inherent structural distortions within basic social institutions which Greek society views with increasing mistrust. In other words, there is a particular substratum where one spark will suffice to ignite a wildfire at any moment in time. Of course, my approach is a circumscribed, selective one that focuses on idiosyncrasies as causes for the phenomenon. Yet any link to more general issues and wider environments should also bear in mind what Wilhelm Wundt termed the 'heterogeneity of purposes'. The potential spread of phenomena or the successive triggering of social behaviour via the dense,

centre-free neural network of contemporary humanity does not require a cohesive public and a succinct 'message'. What movements 'mean' is often a product of the abstractive interpretive violence by which we academics earn our crust.

6

Saint Nicolas Night

Antonis Karakousis, *Editing Director, 'To Vima', Greece*

On that festive Saturday night of 6 December - the feast of Saint Nicholas - nothing forebode the storm that would follow. The weather was good, it was a big celebration, those celebrating were many and, as usual, Athens was at a standstill, the streets jammed with people going to the theatre, the cinema, clubs, bars, cafes.

And then, a little before 9pm, an unforeseen and yet fateful event occurred. It only took an exchange of a few harsh words between some youths and police officers in Messologiou Street, in the flammable and for many years 'free' district of Exarchia, to stir the blood and to lead a 'macho' police officer to raise his weapon and fire. As a result the first youth found in the path of the bullet was shot dead.

As soon as the news started spreading, between 9 and 10pm, that the youth Alexis Grigoropoulos had been shot dead by police fire, the atmosphere became electrified. Rapidly the news circulated to youth hangouts in central Athens and the suburbs, mainly via mobile phone and the Internet. In double quick time students began to congregate at the scene of the murder in Exarchia Square.

Almost simultaneously, in the university buildings of central Athens, the Athens Law School, the Polytechnic, Panteio University and the Economic University of Athens, gatherings of enraged leftist, anti-establishment and anarchist groups, created a volatile atmosphere. Very soon, the rage felt against the police spilled-over into violence in the area around Exarchia and spread rapidly. From midnight onwards, violent episodes and clashes with the police multiplied; the destruction of shops and arson attacks became more generalised in the centre of Athens.

That night, a great number of youths, seemingly with great ease as if they were prepared well in advance, broke all limits; they swore, threw rocks at the police, and the more aggressive among them did not hesitate to smash-up and even burn shops and cars. Those who found themselves in the centre of Athens felt the tension and the climate of uncontrollable youth violence. The fateful, fatal event in Exarchia was reflected in the eyes of the youngsters and the uncontrollable actions they took. It was characteristic of the great anger, the overflowing rage, that the major damage was caused in the traditional commercial centre of Athens, between Syntagma and Monastiraki Squares, by youths who were leaving the bars and clubs of the Psyri area.

On Sunday morning Athens looked bombarded. However, the violence continued for days and spread across all big urban centres, from Crete and Peloponnese, to Thessaly, Epirus and Macedonia. This was accompanied by student attacks on police stations. On Tuesday 9 December, the destruction

was even bigger and was accompanied by widespread looting whose perpetrators included groups of immigrants living in central Athens.

Thus the youth explosion acquired a mass and panhellenic dimension. As this phenomenon unfolded, it afforded the opportunity to other extremist groups to be rejuvenated and organise more acts of violence and terrorism. It is not by chance that following the December 2008 events the successor terrorist groups to 17 November, ELA, and other organisations, were reformed or reborn. These groups were capable of, and often realised, coordinated terrorist attacks against multiple targets. Since then a number of intensely symbolic attacks have taken place against various targets, including banks, state owned organisations and political offices.

All these events allowed many people to speak of a new social phenomenon, which others, especially other Europeans, associated with the international economic crisis, and saw it as a precursor to a wider social explosion that could be transmitted throughout and threaten Europe more generally.

The death of young Grigoropoulos is not enough to explain the lengthy duration of the events and the intensity of the challenge. Those who follow closely Greek politics and the dynamics within the groups of Greek youths are aware of the historical undercurrent to the current events. Greece has a tradition of such clashes. In 1965, before the colonels' Junta, we witnessed similar events. In the midst of palace intrigue, the monarchy's interventions in Greek politics and the interference of para-state forces, radicalised elements of the Greek youth, distanced from the activity of the official left, and making reference to Che Guevara and the Cuban revolution, reacted in a similar fashion to the 'July events' (*Iouliana*). The *koukouloforoi* or 'hoodies' of that period also attacked the centre of Athens, clashed with the police, smashed shop windows and threw rocks cut from paving stones.

Athens was involved in that early phase of what became a bloody urban guerrilla movement in Europe. Supporters of Castro and Guevara planned the organisation of armed groups in Athens aimed at fighting against the police state and political persecution. These early activities were cut short by the military coup in April 1967, only to be repeated in about 1970, and to constitute the basis for the creation of extreme leftist revolutionary organisations directed against the junta. From within these sprang forth, during the *Metapolitefsi*, the groups of revolutionary violence such as ELA and 17 November.

Since then there have always been hard core left and leftist cells within the universities and youth circles in general. At times they acquired the power to intervene in the political scene and at others they were marginalised: but they always sowed the seeds of doubt in the system as a whole.

During the last 5-6 years this pre-existing leftist and anti-systemic movement has been reborn. It found international expression through the anti-globalisation movement, it exploited the decline of 'ideologicopolitics' and the organisational demise of official political parties, it found strength in the failures of the education system and of widening inequality and high youth unemployment, and developed a particularly dynamic presence within universities. Anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian groups emerged on the basis of ideas and perceptions of autonomy in most Greek universities, comprising a powerful mechanism of contestation, outside from the control of the official left.

The university sit-ins and occupations in the last few years and a lot of dynamic protests in the streets of Athens against the establishment of private universities are attributed to those groups. They drew, and draw, energy from the myths of May '68 and they want to maintain the historical connection with the protest movement which emerged in 1979, when the

then conservative government of Georgios Rallis attempted to impose changes at the universities.

These unique, autonomous and extra-parliamentary groups were flanked by anarchist and anti-establishment forces, with presence in Athenian neighbourhoods and influence on the marginalised and 'lumpen' sections of the Greek youth, which have flourished by their side in the last few years.

Last December all the anti-systemic forces coincided and constituted a dynamic front of contestation, not only against the police and the government, but also against other perceived systemic forces and especially the media. The economic crisis reinforced their actions and rendered the anti-systemic and anti-capitalist message clearer and more readily transmittable to wider circles of youth. In other words the murder of Alexis Grigoropoulos in Exarchia functioned as fuse in an already volatile social stratum.

In the months since those horrendous events, much has changed. The economic crisis is deepening and continuously affects more people; the state recedes and the politico-economic system is disputed; the credibility of politics is eroding; youth discontent simmers; crime rates are on the rise; the instances of political violence and terrorist actions have multiplied; fear and insecurity nestles for good in the minds and soul of many people; the police becomes continuously more aggressive, as do the media, and no one knows any longer what the next unforeseen and accidental event, like that of last December in Exarchia, will bring.

7

Words Have Consequences

Paschos Mandravelis, *Journalist – Political Analyst, 'I Kathimerini', Greece*

'Vandalism' in Greek used to be quite a precise word. In dictionaries it was defined as the 'intentional destruction of works of art'. 'Vandalism' now means the 'deliberate destruction of everything', even if that has no artistic value at all. It was probably the ire of owners that stretched the definition: They needed a stronger word to describe their misfortune and they stretched the word till they destroyed the signification. Today we don't have a different word for the 'deliberate destruction of works of art'. When all wilful destruction is 'vandalism', vandalism seizes to exist.

The stretching of 'vandalism' does not stop here. Now it is the anger of the so-called 'vandals' that sunders the element of intentionality from the meaning of the word. I first encountered the double stretched word in Panteio University of Athens during a conference about the role of Mass Media during the December riots. When a speaker uttered the word

‘vandalism’ a student stood up and shouted ‘vandalism is not the uprising of the young, vandalism is the submission of youth’. Of course neither is ‘vandalism’ but when stretching words becomes an acceptable practice, discussion becomes impossible. Moreover stretched words can be used as excuses for violent acts.

Two of the vandalised words in Greek society are ‘violence’ and ‘power’. A long time ago, ‘violence’ only meant what we call today ‘physical violence’. In our postmodern public dialogue ‘violence’ is everywhere and every human contact can be tagged as a violent one. The state has the monopoly of violence, and this Weberian notion is stretched to the belief that every expression of governance is violent. Acrimonious speech is considered ‘violent speech’. The educational system is ‘a relation of power between the instructor and pupils’, so it has elements of violence within. Even cars exert violence – there was graffiti during December that prompted for ‘violence to the violence of cars’.

Metaphorically speaking, cars do exert some kind of violence in our lives. But this metaphor, combined with the glint of postmodern pedagogy, becomes a literal scheme in the minds of young people. A lot of people take for granted that physical, psychological and metaphoric violence is the exact same thing. But, if everything is violence, physical violence is excused. When cars are considered violent, burning them is self-defence. Of course these postmodern schemes do not appeal to everyone, but on the other hand not everyone was burning and looting during the December riots in Athens.

Edmund Burke’s ‘fourth estate’ was translated in Greek as the ‘fourth branch of government’. In the minds of people and (unfortunately) politicians mass media possesses power equal or even bigger than the three traditional branches of government. Of course, speech in general has the power to shape beliefs. But even if we take for granted the metaphor that the ‘pen is mightier than the sword’, speech - even the most acrimonious –

does not physically hurt people and it is different from 'violence', as it used to be perceived. The mass media do not have a share in the monopoly of violence: they don't make laws, they do not arrest people, and they don't jail them.

This is becoming less and less clear in Greek society. Speech is often described as violent and sometimes punished legally more harshly than real acts of physical violence, because in the mind of lawmakers 'language has no bones, but it can break bones'. On the basis that violence is not only physical, but can also be psychological, free speech is restricted. On the other hand, when the press is considered as a branch of government, then it should be restricted in the way the three traditional branches are restricted. And indeed, there are several laws that restrict the media industry on the basis of their exercising power.

When postmodernism meets bad translation, intellectuals and journalists should live in fear. One of the popular slogans chanted during the demonstrations was 'violence to the violence of power'. If speech is violence and the media possess power, then in the mind of the 'revolutionary' the media, journalists and intellectuals become legitimate targets. And indeed they did. Small bombs were detonated at the front doors of writers and a new terrorist group opened fire aiming at the vans of a television station, saying that they attacked the '4th branch of government', an 'ally of the establishment', because 'journalism won the confidence of society pretending that it is against power but in reality climbed to be the first power in society' and 'media shape our everyday lives (...) so we become disciplined subjects. They manipulate our minds every single day so that we fill the reserve of our disciplined time with the values and faculties of the system'.

If all this sounds nonsensical, we should take into consideration that it is the dominant rhetoric in Greece. Greece lives in a nebula of ill-defined concepts. Postmodernism prevails in the humanities; metaphorical speech is

taken literally not only by kids on the streets but by the high priests of the dominant leftist ideology. The destruction of meaning turns eventually into destruction of property and in the case of power symbols, like policemen, to the destruction of life.

Of course the December riots were not just a big misunderstanding of concepts. They contained a lot of anger due to real problems. They had the frustration of a generation that believes that it has no future. Teachers and pupils deal with a heavily bureaucratic and ineffective educational system every day. Political scandals and the ineffectiveness of government played a role. All sociological explanations describe the big mess that Greece is in.

What is different this time is the way this exasperation was expressed. The destruction of meaning also destroyed the political intervention of the December student rallies. When postmodernism hits the streets we have riots with no clear political demands. Moreover, many argued that the 'uprising didn't need a specific statement of demands. What happened is a statement that something goes wrong'. But this is postmodernism with different means: it doesn't clarify anything and it doesn't help to solve problems.

8

Facing up to the Culture of Violence

Manos Matsaganis, *Associate Professor, Athens University of Economics & Business, Greece*

It is probably too soon for a full understanding of what caused the events of December 2008. All I can offer is a random reflection on the state we in Greece find ourselves in, three months later.

A policeman who uses his regulation firearm to kill (cold-bloodedly, according to most accounts) a 15-year old only because the latter shouted abuse at him is obviously an exceptional case. However, the sense of impunity of our security forces, and their perception that they are above the law, is the rule. Not all of them are murderers, certainly. But it is true that the police too often acts with gratuitous brutality (e.g., when dealing with foreign immigrants), that corruption in their ranks is too diffuse, and above all that violent and/or corrupt policemen can always count on the complicity of their colleagues and superiors, as on the ‘understanding’ of judges. Clearly, things are more complicated when there is a dead man (and as

young as that), but a way to transform a life sentence into a mere three-year imprisonment on appeal can always be found. It has happened before (in the mid-1980s). Why think it will be different this time?

The lack of trust in the willingness and the capacity of the high ranks of the security forces to punish the guilty and take all necessary measures to ensure that no such incidences happen again fits in the context of a more general lack of trust in institutions – all of them. A quick look at the front pages of our daily papers over the past two or three years leaves no doubt. Judges protecting organised crime. Priests, nay monks, moving around by helicopter (‘to save time’), clinching million euro deals (‘for the benefit of our monasteries’), keeping millions on offshore accounts. And, obviously, ministers who use state funds as if these were their private property. A moral degradation never seen before – and all in the reign of a prime minister who came to power with the promise to defeat powerful interests (or literally, with his characteristic elegance, ‘to beat the pimps’).

To this cocktail, pretty explosive as it is, one ought to add the fact that for too many youths everyday life and future prospects are rather bleak. As shown by international comparisons, our teenagers study more and learn less than most of their European counterparts. Our best universities do a decent job in extremely adverse conditions, but are left little space to breath, squeezed as they are by a suffocating state beurocracy intent on micro-management of academic affairs on the one hand, and by the endemic contestation (often assuming violent forms) on the part of a minority of their students on the other hand. Youth unemployment is second only to certain lawless regions of the Italian South. The few who do have a job must come to terms with low wages and work insecurity. And, at the background, the asphyxiating presence of a hyper-protective family, which no longer believes in hard work as a value, but likes to cultivate instead, unrealistically high expectations.

Crucially, the difficult task of integrating one million recent immigrants (in a native population of 10 million) has been shamefully neglected. Their children spend most of their time in their own ethnically homogeneous neighborhoods in Athens and elsewhere. They go to local state schools, that are gradually abandoned by Greek kids as their families move out, and where they are taught basic numeracy and literacy by increasingly demoralised (and increasingly resigned) teachers. Outside school, in workplaces and in their dealings with the state, they face hostility or, at best, indifference. They have no faith in, and feel no loyalty to, the country that hosts them – and who can blame them?

The above may help make sense of the intensity of so many adolescents' reaction to the killing of a boy their age. But in order to explain the violence, the damage to banks, the looting of shops, as well as the destruction of state universities, public libraries and national theatres, one needs to turn elsewhere; beyond the repulsion of the middle classes, which might have been more convincing had they been less accustomed to evading taxes and ignoring rules when it suits them; and beyond the hollow words of our radicals, who christen 'social revolt' (and by implication, worth our respect) every act of blind and indiscriminate violence at the expense of universities, libraries, theatres and the rest of our public (and, incidentally, defenseless) cultural institutions.

To explain the great number of youth committing acts of violence, and the even greater number of those tolerating such violence, one would have to tackle rather uncomfortable issues. Like the profound indifference (if not open complacency) of many Greeks with respect to the actions of the '17 November' terrorist group that was operative from the early 1970s to the beginning of the current decade. Like the spontaneous solidarity of an overwhelming majority of Greeks to the bloodiest regimes and leaders of our time (Slobodan Milošević, Saddam Hussein and others), on the grounds that they stood up to the Americans. Like the silence of our trade unions,

and the lack of attention of our public opinion, to the victims (all foreign workers) of the many accidents at work caused by the reckless drive to complete the stadiums and supporting infrastructure in time for the 2004 Athens Olympics. Like the tacit acceptance of, and the enthusiastic participation in, the collapse of the most elementary rules of civil coexistence that is the everyday chaos of motor traffic. Like the resignation of so many in front of the regular and perfectly organised clashes between rival football fans.

Early responses to the crisis on the part of the political elite have often verged on overt or covert indulgence, of the 'these-kids-have-good-reasons-to-be-violent' variety. This show of remorse is too shallow and insincere to be convincing. In any case, it will take much more than that for an exit from the current political crisis, just as the economic crisis begins to bite. The culture of violence is not easy to defeat, not by a polity that lacks the moral authority to combat it, nor in a society that refuses to acknowledge its existence. This time, no short cuts are on offer. As the saying goes, a crisis can be an opportunity to amend the bad old ways and make a fresh start. Will we Greeks be up to it?

9

On the December Events

Nicos Mouzelis, *Emeritus Professor, London School of Economics, UK*

One cannot fully explain the massive mobilisation and the extent of violent/destructive acts during last December by mere reference to direct, obvious factors such as the fascist mentality of the policeman who killed Alexis Grigoropoulos, the brutality of some members of the security forces or the mismanagement of the crisis by the government. For a fuller explanation one will have to focus on a number of factors which are visible when one broadens the analytical framework; one will also have to show the way in which such factors are linked to each other and to the overall development of the crisis.

The political and socioeconomic dimension

Very briefly, starting from the political sphere, an important cause of the phenomena under investigation is the large-scale disorganisation of the police that the New Democracy government created (from 2004 onwards)

by placing its own people in key administrative positions. In addition to this type of clientelism, all post-1974 Greek governments are responsible for tolerating the continuous violent practices of a small number of anti-state, anarchically oriented groups. They are also responsible for failing to reshape the *'asylon'* institution – an institution which was meant to protect academic freedom by preventing the police from entering university premises. Instead, by the misuse of the relevant regulations, the *asylon* was used (and is still used) by a small number of activists cum hooligans who periodically disrupt lectures, loot/destroy university property and promote criminal activities such as drug dealing. Finally within the political sphere one should take into account the large scale corruption and the uninterrupted series of scandals which led to the delegitimation of political elites and parties.

As to the socio-economic dimension, the dominance of neo-liberal ideologies and policies from the 1980's until the present economic crisis created huge inequalities and marginalised an important section of the population. This situation is felt more acutely by the young who experience high rates of unemployment or have to accept badly paid jobs and exploitative work conditions.

The educational/psychocultural dimension

The underfunding of education and research, the lamentable state of higher education, the failure of educational reforms, the government's upgrading of non-state colleges, which devalues the standing of state universities, and the exorbitant amounts of money that parents have to spend if they want their children to undertake university studies – have all created an explosive state of resentment and indignation.

One should add that the new generation also faces severe problems in a late modern/postmodern context – a context within which traditional codes, or early modern certainties/ideologies, have weakened creating a void that

young people are called to fill up. As Anthony Giddens has pointed out, today the young, who face a multitude of choices in all social spheres, not only have to choose within a given framework, they have to create that very framework. In other words they have to 'create their own biography'. Unavoidably, this situation creates anxieties and existential dilemmas which are much more acute than those that previous generations had to face.

Civil Society

Needless to say one could lengthen the 'list of causes'. The interesting problem however is to show how the factors mentioned above are linked to each other; in what ways do they constitute an integrated whole having its own logic and dynamic? I think that the civil society concept is very relevant here. It helps us to understand how the constellation of factors relates to the forms that social mobilisation took. More concretely, in societies with well functioning democratic institutions one always finds strong organisations (e.g., NGO's or authorities really independent from the government) which operate between the state and citizens. We find, in other terms, a strong civil society which follows neither a party nor a market logic. Such a 'third sector' creates alternative ways of linking the social with the political.

In Greece civil society is extremely weak. This is mainly due to the fact that the political system operates less as a party democracy and more as a 'partocratic democracy'. By partocracy I mean a system of rule within which the party logic penetrates all institutional spheres undermining their autonomy and their specific values. From the sphere of sports and the professions to that of art and the university, party considerations prevail. They weaken all non-party, non-clientelistic, civil society linkages between the citizen and the state. Within this context social discontent generates protests and mobilisations which have an unfocused, diffuse character. They do not produce strategies with positive outcomes for the social whole.

I think that the above helps us to better understand how the various causal factors that we have discussed are linked to the form that the protests have taken. For if the death of Alexis operated as a catalyst, the partocratic undermining of civil society explains the dead-end character of the ensuing mobilisations/riots. These led, on the one hand, to the familiar blind violence of anti-state groups, and on the other to more peaceful pupil/student demonstrations. In the former case we observe brainless, nihilistic practices which have been wrongly compared with May '68. (The May '68 events may not have changed the political system, but they have shaped to a great extent the social imagery of western societies). In the latter case, the relatively unformed, protean energies of a protesting youth were not channelled in a transformative manner. For neither the weak civil society nor the discredited parties could play such a constructive, channelling role.

To conclude, as far as future developments are concerned, one cannot but be pessimistic. The anarchist violence will not disappear – on the contrary it will probably take more extreme, terrorist forms. As to the more peaceful and fully justified protests of the younger generation, these will continue; but they will lead neither to political nor to cultural changes. As long as the combination of a weak civil society and a strong partocracy prevails, there is very little room for hope.

10

Some Thoughts on the 2008 Riots in Greece

George Pagoulatos, *Associate Professor, Athens University of Economics & Business, Greece*

The December 2008 riots exploded before the global financial crisis had even begun to hit the ‘real’ economy and society of Greece. One can only imagine what the scope of vandalism and havoc could have been had the angry rioters also seen a family member or friend being laid off.

We should neither overlook nor overstate the socio-economic causes of the December 2008 riots. As all complex phenomena, this too cannot be attributed to monocausal explanations. Any attempt to locate the causes at any single particular realm (be it socio-economic anxiety, labour market insecurity, the state of education, a culture of defiance to the rule of law, or a decline of social values and institutions), is misguided to the extent that all such factors have had their own role to play. And their relative impact

probably differed upon each of the particular subgroups involved in the riots.

Thus any attempt to find the 'real cause' of the December 2008 revolt is misplaced by seeking to answer the wrong question. First of all, it was not exclusively a student revolt, though militant leftist and anarchist students were probably a principal constituent of the rioters that set Athens (and other cities) ablaze.

Second, the revolt was both spontaneous (in that it formed an immediate reaction to the sudden police killing of a high-school student on the night of December 6) and organised, though in a decentralised manner. Hundreds or thousands of messages were sent over mobile phones and the internet calling for demonstrations and 'revenge' for the killing of Alexis. Various anarchist and militant leftist groups prepared and organised violent actions (burning, destroying and looting banks, shops and public buildings), seeking to incite social revolt against the state and the capitalist system. Then even more organised terrorist groupings took over, encouraged by an environment of state and police dysfunction, and generalised lawlessness.

Third, the riots were the culmination of a long period of 'social learning' in repeated youth demonstrations (including prolonged occupation of schools and universities), that tended each time to stretch further and further the limits of lawlessness and impunity. Demonstrations were multiplied and radicalised during the massive student rallies of 2006-08, regularly culminating in vandalism and clashes of the most militant groups with the police. It was thus not the phenomenon as such but the fierce intensity and the massive scope of destructive violence that was unprecedented in the December 2008 riots.

It would be foolish to ignore the socio-economic causes of societal anger and violence, even if it only concerns a limited minority. Anti-systemic

indignation is bred particularly in poorer neighbourhoods, fuelled by a sense of despair over socio-economic insecurity, corruption and party clientelism, and a generalised sense of institutional and ethical decline involving not just government but a significant part of the political system, the judicial system, the media, the business sector, the educational system, even the church. After a peak of national self-confidence following Greece's adoption of the euro and the successful hosting of the 2004 Olympics, public confidence in democratic institutions and the country's future has once again reached very low levels during the last couple of years.

Yet the December riots were not an uprising of the downtrodden, a social revolt. Inequalities have risen in Greece over the last ten or twenty years, in that the distance of the highest incomes from the median income has increased. But the worse-off and the bottom quartile have also seen their situation improve. In fact, relative poverty as distance from the median income has not increased, and, in terms of real purchasing power, poverty has notably declined.

Nonetheless, a sense of income decline and a middle class 'squeeze' has been widely felt (and much talked about) recently in society. This has much to do with the high rates of youth unemployment and low starting wages (the '700 euro generation'), intensified competition and precariousness in the labour market, and dynamic upward but also downward mobility within the country's huge middle class. It also has to do with the growing gap between expectations and capabilities, in a consumer society in which rapid growth of bank credit has fuelled (and to a significant extent helped realise) materialistic dreams of home ownership, a brand new car and more comfortable living. No wonder banks and luxury shops became prime-targets of anti-capitalist raids during and after the December 2008 riots.

Who were the hooded culprits behind the waves of violence, arson and destruction that ensued? Certainly not the thousands of high-school

students, who peacefully demonstrated their healthy anger and grief for the killing of their fellow teenager by an out-of-control, vigilante policeman. Hood-wearing youngsters from the affluent suburbs joined the poor and marginalised of the urban neighbourhoods, the anarchists, the lumpen hooligans, the drug addicts and the destitute immigrants in raiding stores and setting banks on fire. Many rushed to experience the unique rite of passage of real battle, throwing rocks and Molotov-cocktails at the police Special Forces.

The great loser from the riots, and the new climate they have helped establish, is the culture of democratic dialogue, tolerance and pluralistic conciliation that was meant to prevail, especially in the universities. The brazen and systematic exploitation of the university asylum by violent extremists and vandals intolerant to opposite views has destroyed academic freedom, and torn apart the peace and normality that are vital for the survival and flourishing of any academic community. The defenders of the 'no-go' sanction for the police under the institutionalised university asylum are now on the defensive, and so are the advocates of a permissive stance towards rebelled youths. The failure of the state apparatus to provide effective fundamental enforcement of the rule of law has created an image of state powerlessness which further emboldens violent, criminal and terrorist groups. At the same time, the widespread demand for effective police protection is boosting a powerful law-and-order agenda, which is picked up by populist politicians, journalists, charlatans, and various authoritarian and xenophobic elements in society. Such climate of polarisation could easily turn a poorly trained, demoralised police into a force of abusive vigilantism, further eroding the already problematic protection of civil rights, and widening the rift separating the marginalised youth from societal institutions. This could turn into a vicious social spiral in the face of a nasty global economic crisis.

11

A More Mundane Reading of the December 2008 Riots in Athens

Dimitris Papadimitriou, *Senior Lecturer, University of Manchester, UK*

The recent outburst of violence in Greece struck at the very heart of the *Metapolitefsi* consensus. The riots of December 2008, and their ongoing aftershocks, continue to ruffle feathers amongst Greece's political elites. Over the past few months there has been no shortage of commentary about the rights and wrongs of what happened. Indeed much of the discussion has focused on the normative underpinnings/implications of violent protest in Greece. Less attention has been directed towards explaining its root causes.

For the sympathisers of the 'youth movement', the sight of Athens burning was romanticised beyond any rationality. Demonstrators were publicly congratulated for having 'woken up', abandoning their Nintendos for baseball bats and Molotov cocktails. The 'authoritarian Greek state' and the 'corrupt order of the *Metapolitefsi*' became enemy number one. This

depressing paternalism towards young people was often wrapped in a thousand clichés. Its common denominator: an absurdly uniform rejection of both modernity (e.g., globalisation) and tradition (e.g., the Christmas tree at Syntagma square!). Its banner: the glorification of ‘defeat’, the elevation of the underdog to the status of hero.

At the other end of the spectrum those horrified by the disorder in the streets of Athens regarded the youth responsible as ‘outcasts’ that ‘needed to be taught a lesson’ (if only the government could teach this lesson!). Many attacked the attackers on grounds of political immaturity and lack of a clear agenda. As if rioting was a tidy, organised, enterprise. As if the heterogenous crowd that participated in these events could ever produce a well thought out agenda and a clear vision for the future. A quick look at the Greek revolution (or indeed the French or any other revolution) testifies to similar discrepancies. The outcome of revolutions (or more generally political violence) is always a million miles away from the demands and aspirations of those who initiated them.

I am not making these parallels light-heartedly. I do not wish to attach to the events of December 2008 characteristics of a revolution. I am not sure I know what the term really means. Neither do I want to engage in moral relativism that does not distinguish between violence and non-violence. I, like many others, found the violence perpetrated by the protesters disturbing. I condemned them publicly in the same way that I continue to condemn the violence suffered by those who dare to speak out against them. Yet my personal dislike of the methods (and rhetoric) used during the recent events in Athens is in itself insufficient to explain why they took place in the first place. In our unanimous condemnation of the flawed methods of its expression, we should not abdicate from the ambition of explaining the reasons behind the youth’s disconnection from politics.

In my eyes, the root cause of the violence in Athens is not a reaction to the authoritarian nature of the Greek state or a generalised rejection of the *Metapolitefsi* consensus. Sure, certain parts of our political system are in need of urgent reform. I would personally single out the electoral law (ideally towards the introduction of closed party lists and the break up of large electoral districts) and party financing as top priorities. However, it is worth remembering that for all of its faults, the two-party system that formed the backbone of the post-Junta period is responsible for the longest spell of political stability and economic growth in the history of the country. Although too many incidents of police brutality (particularly against immigrants) go unpunished, I don't believe that the Greek state is more authoritarian or intrusive than most European (or American) comparators. I also happen to believe that Greece today is not more corrupt than it was in the 1950s, the 1920s or indeed throughout the 19th century.

What is often perceived in public imagination as generalised decay is, in my opinion, best understood as a series of (often interconnected) public policy failures that should be 'unpacked' and addressed in a sober and targeted manner. Let's start from the incident that sparked the recent violence. The death of a young person in the hands of a trigger-happy policeman is indicative of a more generalised collapse in public service ethos that can be witnessed across the wider public sector in Greece. This incident has more to do with shockingly low levels of training and operational planning in the Greek police service than the re-emergence of a 1950s-style police-state. The underlying failure, however, lies elsewhere.

Over the past 20 years, Greece has sustained one of the highest and most persistent levels of unemployment in the EU. High unemployment has depressed wages and has consistently eaten away the dignity and sense of achievement of young people. The desperate search for jobs has also fuelled the monster of clientelism which has now consumed both the public and (increasingly) the private sectors. The increasing irrelevance of our

educational system (at all levels) has certainly exacerbated the demand side of the unemployment equation. Its failure to remain free, even at the secondary level, has also (justifiably) created a mounting sense of injustice.

Why have these failures persisted? People often forget that during the past 20 years there have been numerous attempts to reform Greece's educational system and labour market. All of them carried with them significant political costs. Ask Mr. Kontogiannopoulos, Mr. Arsenis, Mr. Giannitsis and Mrs. Giannakou. All of them are no longer members of the Greek parliament. Our concern should, therefore, be directed, not towards the system's ability to *initiate* reforms, but rather on its capacity to *deliver* reforms and, most importantly, to deliver reforms that *work*. To succeed in the first objective our society as a whole needs to reconsider its often indefensible predisposition towards the defence of the status quo. As regards the second objective, our system of governance has yet to develop the resources that will enable it to articulate complex policy problems and seek their solution. This is both an institutional and cultural shortcoming, but needs not to be seen as a fatal flaw of our current political order. It is for this reason that I support the *Metapolítefsi* consensus and I object to the burning down of Athens and its Christmas tree.

12

A Glimpse from the Future – But What Sort of Future?

Antonis D. Papagiannides, *EU affairs counsel to the ADNPA, Greece*

When – soon after the social unrest/youth explosion in Athens, then the aftershocks in the regions – President Nicolas Sarkozy was reportedly worried by the risk of contagion throughout Europe, one could trace a curious feeling in a large segment of the Greek media. It was part wonder, part ‘suits them right’, part even pride at Greece serving as some sort of dark (or, rather, flaming) avant-garde in turning everyday-life tensions, a deeply ingrained and widespread feeling of inequality, a sense of ever-diminishing expectations, into a wave of riots.

The very fact that the Sarkozy fears were expressed at an EU Summit, (also that French reforms in the field of education were soon afterwards put on the back-burner), added to the positive assessment of the December 2008 events. Without going all the way and considering these events as a re-run of the May ’68 Paris riots, with all the political and society-changing

consequences they had over the decades that followed, the welling-up of anger and frustration, the destruction of property at the hands of groups of ‘hoodies’ and the play with fire in front of (generally approving) demonstrating crowds, the engaging of the police in open fighting in the streets – all such aspects of the days of anger were viewed with fascination. Deeper meanings were sought. Slogans and images from the riots were integrated in public debate; they tended to crowd out all other news from front pages of newspapers and prime-time TV news bulletins. Political consequences came to be hotly debated; a Cabinet reshuffle and a radical re-direction of government economic policies resulted largely from these events.

If we visit one of the most articulate pamphlets-cum-website-support of these days (REVOLT, the paper published by the Athens School of Economics/ASOEE), we find an attempt at building a theoretical framework for the riots.

‘The tradition of oppression teaches us that the situation we live in is in no way an exception – it constitutes the rule. We should understand history in a way adapted to this reality (Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*). Today, the city is subject to a continuous change in symbols and meanings. Streets that used to link forms of coercion, now link expressions of anger and refusals to submit. The Christmas Tree^[6] instead of serving as a symbol of a dead festivity now serves as a (burnt-down) symbol of the festivities organised by the living [...]’.

‘We are here, we are everywhere! We are a glimpse from the future. Tomorrow we will witness a new dawn where nothing will be certain. And what could be more liberating after so many years of certainties? One bullet^[7] was enough to cut the unyielding continuity of days that were so identical to each other [...] Those who want to understand, will understand. Now is the time to throw open the cells that shut each one of us in his/her miserable life’.

⁶ Traditionally decorating Constitution Square, opposite the Parliament building; the Athens Christmas Tree was burnt down one December evening – from then on, riot police stood guard around it, with demonstrators regularly dancing around a sort of ‘farandole’ and showering both policemen and the Tree with garbage, including pig heads from the meat market.

⁷ From the gun of a policeman, who shot and killed a 15-year old schoolboy, thus sparking the December riots.

It would be quite instructive to read this text – or any other of the contributions of the self-styled anarchists and insurgents during those days of anger – in tandem with the diagnosis of, say, *The Economist* of the same period.

‘There is something weird and frightening about the sight of a modestly prosperous European country that is suddenly gripped by an urban uprising that the authorities cannot contain [...] the incident that sparked Greece’s mayhem – the killing by police of a teenager – could have happened almost anywhere. And there are many cities where an angry minority is ready to run amok: think of Budapest in 2006, Paris in 2005. But in the Greek case a spasm of rage among youngsters and the bohemian underworld has laid bare a deeper seam of discontent: with corruption, maladministration and the sheer frustration at the bottom of the Athenian pile [...] In health, schooling and other public services, bad state provision fuels a huge under-the-counter market, creating in turn vested interests opposed to any change. Life is tough for youngsters with energy and talent but no cash or connections [...] Of course; none of this excuses the riots. Indeed, many of the policies (such as reinforcing the ban on private education) that are advocated by self appointed representatives of Greece’s angry young people would make their problems worse’.

A point missed – or consciously left aside – by two so differing analyses is that, contrary to what happened in France with the revolt of the ‘banlieues’, the riots in Greece (both in Athens and in the regions) tended to involve and cater to lower-middle and middle-class youths, while the crowds of demonstrators and/or bystanders was also largely of the same profile. Even a smattering of the upper-middle class was involved (such being surely the recruiting ground of demonstrators in front of the Greek embassies in London or Washington). This, in turn, translates into the profile of the political after-effects of the riots, as they were internalised by the hopelessly ineffective Greek political system.

A further point that should in no way be missed is the way in which the police, who were used to contain the riots, not only proved largely incompetent, but were visibly overwhelmed by the rioting crowds, even openly ridiculed by teenagers. When, following a change in Government

lines of command, the police tried a tougher stance, they soon slid to over-reaction (e.g., arresting en masse civil-rights activists and lawyers) thus further alienating public opinion.

If one were to shift the field of vision from mid-December to mid-February, just five or six weeks later, what does one see? Quite unpleasant things. A policeman standing guard in front of the Ministry for Culture was shot at and severely wounded, as was a mini-bus full of policemen. Then, a series of terrorist attacks or, at least, terror-inducing attacks took place. They ranged from the beating-up of a respected left-wing criminologist, Yannis Panoussis, who was participating in a seminar about the reintegrating of ex-convicts into society, to armed attacks against police headquarters, on a TV station and, eventually, to a high-power-explosive car bomb parked in front of a Citigroup bank building.

Arguably, the lethal intent of such attacks differed widely: the beating-up of Panoussis was explained away as a slip-up (senior judges attending the same seminar were to have been the real targets). The attacks on police stations and on media buildings were victimless (but verbal threats for future lethal attacks on journalists and ‘using TV technicians for boxing training purposes’ during demonstrations formed the core of a leaflet left afterwards). A car bomb that echoed Middle East urban warfare didn’t go off (but the threat of massive use of force was very close under the surface). The torching of nine Metro carriages added further confusion.

As these lines are being written, a troubling element is sinking in: all these terrorist manifestations, following so soon after the December ‘Merry Crisis and a Happy New Fear’ events, openly try and link up with the youth explosion and the wide-ranging social unrest. If indeed, the December events were a glimpse of the future, the question begs: what sort of future exactly?

13

Greece, December 2008: A Tragedy in the Waiting

Helena Smith, *Athens-based correspondent for 'The Guardian and The Observer', UK*

YEARS may pass and we will still be debating what it was that started off the spasm of violence that gripped Greece in the month that ended 2008.

As I write, much of the media is awash with talk of how best to tackle the 'hooded ones,' or *koukouloforoi*, those so widely blamed for the country's worst civil disturbances in decades.

The rise in criminality, the resurgence of terrorist activity, the renewed vigour with which protestors are taking to the streets (including, most recently, the children of immigrants born in Greece), are all, in some way, seen as offshoots of the explosion that erupted in December. Just like the riot police, who so regularly stand guard on street corners, the flak-jacketed officers who now patrol Athens' boulevards and commercial districts, and

the graffiti of dissent that like some bad epidemic has spread from wall to wall, pillar to pillar around the capital.

Irrespective of political leaning, Greeks agree that post-December 08 they live in a country that is much less secure. And most, starting with the young, also accept that it is one that could quite easily erupt again. The embers are there: all it will take, they say, is a spark and the inferno will reignite because the dry wood, the kindling that will send the flames shooting high, has yet to be cleared.

This belief is based not so much on ideology, or discontent with the ruling conservatives, or indeed the financial tsunami that, propelled by the global economic crisis, is expected to hit Greece in the coming months (although in a nation where one fifth already live under the poverty line that will surely exacerbate social strains). But rather on the knowledge that so much of the state apparatus, the levers of power that govern daily existence, are ossified, corrupt and rotten to the core.

If the December insurrection laid one thing bare, it is the contempt Greeks hold for a system whose institutions are so widely distrusted and whose political and ecclesiastical elite have come to rely almost solely on graft, cronyism and nepotistic connections. Thirty five years after the restoration of democracy this archaic state of affairs has bred frustration and despair.

It took one bullet to start the riots but once fired it was that dissatisfaction – the *Weltschmerz* born of that despair - which drove so many onto the streets.

From the Baltics to the Balkans, countries have been rocked by revolt, with many of those protests also inspired by anger at the impact of globalised capitalism, rising economic inequality and post-modern malaise.

But while the Athenian uprising can lay legitimate claim to being the first riots against the ‘cult of greed’, Greeks, perhaps more than any other European nation are also acutely aware of - and driven by - their history, with the vestiges of the 1946-49 civil war, the bitter divide between left and right, never far from the surface of social and political life.

Leftists talk of a ‘red thread’ that runs through Greek history; one that connects the anti-Nazi resistance with the events that ushered in the collapse of military rule in 1974 – the November 1973 student occupation of the Athens Polytechnic being at their epicentre – to the eruption of the riots in December.

The generations raised in the shadow of the revolt that was so brutally crushed at the Polytechnic see it as a ‘passing of the relay baton’, a duty almost, to oppose the establishment and, more especially, that hated symbol of authority: the police.

When Epaminondas Korkoneas, the special guard seconded to the police, shot dead Alexis Grigoropoulos, a tousle-haired schoolboy at approximately 9 PM on December 6th, the wave of revulsion that it rapidly triggered shone a bright light not only on the sentiment nearly all Greeks share – disdain for authority – but the length to which the state is also prepared to tolerate civil unrest in the wake of military dictatorship.

The power of the Polytechnic as a defining moment in Modern Greek history – its legacy as a call to arms almost – soon became apparent when, within hours of Korkoneas pulling the trigger, thousands gathered in Exarchia. Had it not been for the psychic pull of the Polytechnic – and the controversial, if hallowed piece of post-Polytechnic legislation obstructing police intervention on the campuses of educational institutions – the riots may well have run out of steam, or at best have been an overnight affair.

Instead, young protesters seeking refuge behind the gates of the Polytechnic were able to create an operations base, one in which they could make petrol bombs, sledgehammer marble slabs into stones and take cover from the police.

Similarly, scenes of rampaging youths lobbing rocks and petrol bombs at shops, banks, cars, hotels and even homes, may never have occurred if a conservative government, in power with a wafer-thin majority of one, had not been so fearful (or mindful), of the associations with right-wing authoritarianism that a clampdown might have elicited.

Greece instead was allowed to descend into chaos with the Interior Minister himself, insisting on the defensive stance taken by riot police, as properties nationwide were attacked, burned and looted. For the anti-establishment movement and other nihilists (including the country's not inarticulate and increasingly well-connected anarchist groups), this was the moment they had been waiting for.

To say that the riots were the sole endeavour of the notorious *koukouloforoi*, or student protestors enraged by the fatal shooting of 15-year old Grigoropoulos (an incident that Greece's children were fast to identify with), would be facile and wrong.

In the wake of the reintroduction of democracy, generations of Greeks have been raised on a diet of bad news: a succession of scandals in a system neither known for its meritocracy nor willing to punish the perpetrators of such infringements of justice.

Middle class kids – disconnected youth frustrated by their perceived lack of prospects – unemployed youngsters and even those lucky enough to have a job but, by and large, earning little more than 700 Euros a month, all felt drawn to the 'uprising' because they saw this as their moment: their time to

vent pent-up rage, to protest against the ills of a society that since democracy's return has disappointed so many.

With no one agent behind the insurrection, the protests may have seemed directionless and with no formal demands – beyond the perennial calls for the improvement of Greece's shambolic education system, desire for police to disarm and, in this case, request for the government to step down.

Indeed, that might be why, so far, they have failed to morph into an organised movement of civil unrest.

But perhaps that was not the point.

Perhaps the point was in the rebellion itself – an uprising that simply said 'eimaste parontes' – 'we are here'. And watch out! We are not going to go away.

Whatever, the spasm of violence that gripped Greece in the month that ended 2008 was a tragedy in the waiting.

14

December's Unquiet Dreams

If I cannot move Heaven, I will raise hell (Virgil)

Foteini Tsalikoglou, *Professor, Panteion University of Social & Political Sciences,
Greece*

If frustration leads to aggression, a well-known hypothesis in psychology, then the uprising of Greece's youth in December 2008 was bound to happen. In hindsight, it is hardly surprising that a mass of youth should flood the streets in what was to develop into an unprecedented uprising – in numbers, duration and in the constantly renewed, often technological inventiveness of its participants – with the death of a 15-year-old triggering strong identification mechanisms ('it could have been me'). The tip of an iceberg floating in dark waters, the unique characteristics of these riots seem to foreshadow the emergence of new collective identities in Greek society. The causes are manifold:

Political crisis. The Greek political scene is dominated by scandals, corruption, impunity, widespread distrust of all institutions, and a culture of lawlessness, in which the distinction between what is legitimate and what is not has become increasingly obscure. The dominant attitude can best be summed up by the words of a former government minister: ‘A legal deed is also a moral one.’

Economic crisis. The Greek economy is in sharp decline, threatening employment, salaries, and pensions. For the first time since the Second World War, an entire generation is deprived of the hope of leading a better life than that of their parents. A bleak future is the only certainty in a climate of ever-increasing uncertainty.

Educational crisis. With a system of ‘free’ education that is anything but free and the privatisation of higher education on the horizon, state universities are in decline. Unemployment among the youth now stands at 17%. Graduates entering the market are faced with the bleak prospect of the so-called ‘generation of the 700 Euros’, while two out of three will land a job that bears no relation at all to their subject of study.

It is in such a climate, nurtured by the all-enveloping individualist bias, that the events of December took place, forcing upon us the question: ‘Who are these youths and what do they want?’

But which youths in particular does the question refer to? Falling back to a general category labelled ‘youth per se’ is disorienting, if not deliberately misleading. One should rather talk about an array of different groups stemming from various family and class backgrounds, embedded in different, and sometimes conflicting ideologies and value systems – groups differentiated according to their psychological and social make-up, their representation of self and other, their status as students or workers, their social and ethnic background, and the degree of social exclusion they are

subject to. Indeed, the main fact that distinguishes these riots may well be the radical heterogeneity of the participants. The crowd consisted of youngsters from privileged suburbs in the north and impoverished areas in the west, children of jobless parents, economic refugees in abject poverty, activists committed to violence, hooligans, anarchists, *agents provocateurs*, and all kinds of ‘hood-wearers’ (*koukouloforoi*), who concealed their identity with a balaclava out of conviction or simply for protection.

This list is not exhaustive, and the categories are provisional and overlapping, suggesting as they do the presence of youth groups in all their known and unknown, formal and informal versions. However, for a brief period in December 2008, dividing lines seemed to disappear: a widely disparate horde of youths gathered together spontaneously and swarmed the streets of Athens and other cities. This is the main reason why the public debate on youth cannot replace youth’s own discourse. What do the December events mean to them? The question is inextricably linked to what it means to be a youth today and needs to be explored in far greater depth than is currently the case.

The notions of identity and identification and the forms of their internal articulation are far from being obvious. For a psychologist there are some crucial questions to be raised regarding the issue of self-representation: how do different youths perceive themselves? How do they picture themselves in the future? What is the relationship between self-image and ‘reality image’? How does their violent behaviour relate to depression as a hidden but potent force? How do anger, despair, frustration, and repressed desires shape their mode of being? And how are these complex issues shaped in turn by the current political and economic conditions?

To answer such complex questions new modes of approach and comprehensive tools need to be explored in addition to conventional ones (in-depth interviews, discourse analysis, etc.). If the December events served

as a process of ‘awakening’, the same may be true in respect to the awakening of scientific thought as it faces the meaning of being young today and, by extension, the meaning of thinking about phenomena one can only partially identify with.

A social phenomenon manifests itself not only through the causes that generated it but also through the second-round social reactions that it provoked. The ‘secondary’ often emerges as ‘primary’. Reactions to December’s riots can be classified into a legitimising discourse (‘they have good reasons’; ‘something good will come out of this, a new awareness’; ‘the “couch” generation is waking up’); a moderate discourse (‘yes, but...’; ‘we understand, but this is going too far’); and a denouncing, delegitimizing discourse (‘they are troublemakers, criminals, and a threat to our democracy’).

The delegitimizing discourse is found in societies that are based on ‘uncertainty avoidance’ and put a high premium on legality, orderliness, and clarity.

It makes use of the distorting mechanism of ‘psychologising’, which reduces complex social phenomena to simplistic ‘psychological’ labels. For example, its exponents stigmatised the protestors as ‘dangerous’ and ‘immature’, and criticised those who expressed legitimising or moderate views with personal remarks like ‘guilt-ridden’ and ‘middle-aged’. Psychologising obscures the tensions that are inherent in a situation, focusing instead on the apparent psychological characteristics of the people involved. Such a discourse is not accidental, nor is it the result of a momentary lapse of reason in an attempt to grasp the reality of the situation. Psychologising is an actual strategy used by its exponents to ensure conformity to the status quo, with the ultimate aim of resisting change.

The issues raised by the December riots are open-ended and reach far beyond any ideologically bound point of view. Were the riots an intense but essentially short-lived uprising or do they have a future? Do they bear any relation to the terrorist attacks that continue to scourge the country? To what extent do the latter lead to a biased re-interpretation of December's events, thereby reinforcing the deadlock reached by delegitimizing discourses?

We should also consider the issue of state violence: minors who are prosecuted on the basis of anti-terrorist laws; protestors who are severely injured by the use of chemicals and tear gas; residents in the city centre with heart and respiratory problems. What is the fate of 'objective' media information in such a sentimentally loaded context?

The December riots brought to light only one aspect of violence. There is also an invisible and more insidious form of violence that is detrimental to mental health, and that is internalised violence – violence that is targeted not against the other, but against the self. In terms of the frustration-aggression model, depression and self-destruction are masked forms of aggression turned against the self when there is no outlet for frustration. This violence hardly appears out in the streets. It surreptitiously cripples life itself and is a repercussion of the December riots that demands special attention.

15

The Riots of December: A Spontaneous Social Phenomenon or a Social Movement?

Persa Zeri, *Professor, Panteion University of Social & Political Sciences, Greece*

According to the German sociologist and social movement expert Dieter Rucht ‘what can happen and will happen is determined to some extent by the past. A deep embodiment and a very slow change of mentalities and cultural patterns define the frame of future possibilities. It is therefore important to look back into the past if one wants to anticipate the potentiality and the probability of future developments’.⁸ On the basis of these remarks, I shall try to broadly outline the social and political background of the 2008 riots in Greece.

⁸ Text of a lecture with the title ‘Anstöße für den Wandel- Soziale Bewegungen im 21. Jahrhundert’ (Impulses for a Change - Social Movements in 21st Century), Berlin, 2 May 2002, p. 1.

To start with, we should stress the unusual intensity of the riots (involving mainly university students and high school pupils), their long duration and extent throughout the country, but also the broad range of the forms of action after the killing of a teenager by the police. Had the death of the youth not taken place, such an escalation would not have been possible.

In Greece, where family bonds are particularly tight and emotional, this absolute outrage sent the whole of society reeling with sympathy, grief and rage. While the government and the police put up with large scale havoc and wrecking, the rioters had a clear field for many days; political parties tried to take advantage of the situation and organised nine demonstrations in three days.

In this context, the position of the left-wing party, 'SYRIZA', gave the impression that it tolerates or even supports the brute violence of the rioters. The December riots laid bare the scale of a profound social and political crisis. In the 1990s, the dominant model of development was based on the strong position of the financial sector, tourism and the improvement of the infrastructure through construction activities. Little importance was given to the promotion of productivity, competitiveness, investment in knowledge and innovation, reform of the educational system and employment; the impact of which in a time of an international economic crisis multiplies the impasses of Greek society. At the dawn of the 21st century, medium-sized companies and small-scale economic activities dominate the economic structure, affecting the state.⁹ Particular interest groups penetrate the state and influence voting attitudes. The system is full of 'veto-players' who raise obstacles to attempts at reform. Scandals, corruption and discontent are the order of the day and have led to a complete lack of trust in politicians.

⁹ Tassos Giannitsis (ed.), *In a Search of a Greek Development Model*, Athens 2007, 120ff.

Moreover the fixation on the state is a central element of Greek political culture. After Greece's transition to democracy in the mid-1970s, a dominance of politics vis-à-vis society was established; of parties as opposed to alternative political forms, of the party leader as opposed to the party organisation. The parties determine the functioning of every formal or informal social and political institution. The predominance of party politics favoured clientelism and strongly restricted the representation of collective interests in associations as well as the development of autonomous social groups. It is only to be expected that the prevailing values in the society are those of distrust, lack of solidarity, indifference to common interest issues, and contempt of the law. Greeks in their majority (two thirds according to a European social research)¹⁰ are the most distrustful people among their fellow citizens in Europe. Traditional structures of family and neighbourhood constitute an obstacle for the development of an interest for participation in social organisations. In a time of high unemployment, young people seeking employment depend on family connections with politicians and entrepreneurs when they try to find a job. The frustration due to lack of perspectives is deeply-rooted.

What seems to be a fatal element of political culture today is the mistrust of society in state institutions, an attitude having its origins in the resistance against the German occupation during Second World War and against the military junta of 1967 to 1974. The problem is that the difference between a dictatorial power and a democratic state of law is not acknowledged in society nowadays, irrespective of the ineffectiveness of democratic institutions. Any violent action against the state can often be accepted by the people whatever its content. The first murders by the terrorist organisation 17 November are still viewed as actions of civil disobedience.¹¹ Moreover, this distrust in state institutions is combined with a mentality of 'getting away

¹⁰ *Politics – Society – Citizens, A European Social Research*, edited by the National Centre for Social Research, Athens 2007, p.279 (in Greek).

¹¹ G. Auernheimer, 'Proteste in Griechenland', *Südost-Europa*, 4/2008, pp.9 ff.

with it' (e.g., illegal buildings, traffic offences, wrecking of public property by rioters). The students arrested for vandalism during the violent demonstrations of recent years were acquitted after the concerted support of parents, professors, the media and politicians.

The violent forms of protest by the students against the upgrading of the status of private colleges of higher education and the killing of the teenager by the police have been combined in the last months with the destruction of teaching rooms, offices and electronic equipment. All this happened under cover of an anachronistic asylum regulation forbidding the police to enter the university premises. Toleration of this vandalism by the left-wing professors association occurs in the context of a network of illicit transactions between student party organisations, left-wing professors, civil servants and the university heads. The university protesters reject any change at a time when Greek universities are in dire need of radical reforms, and youth unemployment in the age bracket of 15 to 24 years has risen to 28%.

The riots of the high school pupils after the killing of the teenager were, to a certain extent, a manifestation of their frustration with an educational system which imposes an enormous burden on them, disproportionate to its results, and leaves them unhappy with their life situation. In addition, the Greek educational system does not encourage critical and analytical thinking; instead, it lurches from the pillar of a strong formalised education (learning by heart, private tutorial centres, etc.) to the post of traditional ideologies (orthodoxy, Hellenism, the nation, etc.).¹² It was only reasonable, therefore, that in the school pupils' actions of protest one could hardly discern concrete demands of social change or any organisational patterns. The uprising has already subsided. The rebellion of university students and school pupils of last December was a spontaneous collective social phenomenon which did not have the characteristics of a social movement in

¹² Ibid., p.11.

the form of systematic actions of groups and organisations aiming at social change by means of protests, and the articulation of social or political alternatives.

In the last few days, an after effect of the December riots is a widespread atmosphere of fear provoked by the attacks of anarchist students against professors, the occupations of public theatres accompanied by looting, while the police and the representatives of state institutions stay absent. New terrorist groups threaten with mass killings and destructions. This is the culmination of a cultural, political and social crisis.

