



## We are an image from the future': Reading back the Athens 2008 riots

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**ABSTRACT.** On the 6<sup>th</sup> of December 2008, a police officer shot dead a teenager in Exarcheia, a central area in Athens. Within hours, the reactions turned into riots spreading across Athens. The Athens 2008 riots marked the beginning of the end of the years of affluence in Greece, which culminated symbolically with the 2004 Olympic Games. This paper proposes to read the December 2008 events back and ask to what extent these riots – symbolised by a graffiti on a wall in Athens saying 'we are an image from the future' – were a harbinger of the Greek crisis and of the generalised civil unrest which ensued and peaked between 2010-2012. With police data claiming that over 26,000 demonstrations have taken place across Greece since the December 2008 riots, civil unrest seems to have become endemic in the country, symptomatic of a crisis that is not only economic and social, but also political in the sense of the crisis of legitimacy of the State, its representatives and its institutions.

**Keywords:** state, Greece, Athens 2008, riots.

### 'Somos uma imagem do futuro': uma interpretação dos atentados de Atenas em 2008

**RESUMO.** No dia 6 de dezembro de 2008, um policial matou um adolescente em Exarcheia, uma área central em Atenas. Em poucas horas, as reações se transformaram em protestos espalhados por Atenas. As massivas manifestações de Atenas em 2008 marcaram o início do fim dos anos de abundância na Grécia, que culminou simbolicamente com os Jogos Olímpicos de 2004. Este artigo propõe-se a interpretar os acontecimentos de dezembro de 2008 e a questionar até que ponto essas manifestações – simbolizadas por um grafite num muro em Atenas dizendo 'somos uma imagem do futuro' – foram um prenúncio da crise grega e da inquietação civil generalizada que se seguiu e atingiu o pico entre 2010-2012. Com dados policiais afirmando que mais de 26.000 manifestações ocorreram em toda a Grécia desde as manifestações de dezembro de 2008, movimentos de protesto massivos parecem ter se tornado endêmicos no país que podem ser interpretados como sintomas de uma crise que não é só econômica e social, mas também política no sentido da crise de legitimidade do Estado, de seus representantes e de suas instituições.

**Palavras-chave:** Estado, Grécia, Atenas 2008, manifestações populares.

### 'Somos una imagen del futuro': una interpretación de los atentados de Atenas en el 2008

**RESUMEN.** El 6 de diciembre de 2008, un policía mató a un adolescente en Exarchia, un área central en Atenas. En pocas horas, las reacciones se transformaron en protestas extendidas por Atenas. Las manifestaciones masivas de Atenas en el 2008 marcaron el inicio del fin de los años de abundancia en Grecia, que culminó simbólicamente con los Juegos Olímpicos de 2004. Este artículo se propone interpretar los acontecimientos de diciembre de 2008 y cuestionar hasta qué punto estas manifestaciones – simbolizadas por un grafiti en un muro en Atenas diciendo 'somos una imagen del futuro' – fueron un presagio de la crisis griega y de la inquietud civil generalizada que se siguió y alcanzó su pico entre 2010-2012. Con datos policiales afirmando que más de 26.000 manifestaciones ocurrieron en toda Grecia desde las manifestaciones de diciembre de 2008, movimientos de protesta masivos parecen haberse vuelto endémicos en el país, pudiendo ser interpretados como síntomas de una crisis y no solo económica y social, sino también política en el sentido de la crisis de legitimidad del Estado, de sus representantes y de sus instituciones.

**Palabras clave:** Estado, Grecia, Atenas 2008, manifestaciones populares.

#### Introduction

On the 6 of December 2008, a police officer shot dead a teenager in Exarcheia, a central area in Athens that holds a key symbolic role in the

universe of left dissent in Greece. Within hours, the reactions turned into riots spreading across Athens, and for almost a month, riots continued to erupt all over Greece, while protests against police

violence acquired an international resonance. The officer had been verbally abused by a group of teenagers earlier that evening and was ordered to leave the area. Disobeying the order, he sought and confronted the group again and subsequently fired a bullet, which initially ricocheted, but then killed the boy, according to the police narrative. The condemnation came rapidly from the police, the government and the political parties, but that did little to appease the protesting public. The response was immediate and demonstrations started within ninety minutes of the attack: the call for action at Exarcheia square was soon transferred into the streets of the city centre, which turned into battlegrounds. The following days, two mass demonstrations took place in the centre of Athens whilst the spirit of dissent expanded across the country with demonstrations in nearly every big city. Protests continued daily for about two weeks, and then frequently for several more days. Thousands of protesters all over Greece took on the streets whereas solidarity protests were organised all over the world. If support was unprecedented, material damages were too: the demonstrations resulted in significant destruction in Athens but also in nearly all largest towns. Shops, university premises and other buildings were destroyed or set on fire. By mid-December, hundreds of schools and universities were under occupation. Bomb attacks were performed against bank and government buildings and several police departments were targeted across the country in a coordinated attack. Additionally, on four occasions police officers were shot, some others were critically wounded, whereas two police officers were killed during the attacks.

The Athens 2008 riots marked the beginning of the end of the years of affluence in Greece, which culminated symbolically with the 2004 Olympic Games. Symbolised by the famous graffiti on a wall in Athens reading 'we are an image from the future', the Athens 2008 (Figure 1) riots seem in retrospective a harbinger of the Greek crisis and of the generalised civil unrest which ensued and peaked between 2010-2012. With police data claiming that over 26,000 demonstrations have taken place across Greece since the December 2008 riots<sup>1</sup>, civil unrest seems to have become endemic in the country, symptomatic of a crisis that is not only economic and social, but also

political in the sense of the crisis of legitimacy of the State, its representatives and its institutions.



**Figure 1.** We are an image from the future': reading back the Athens 2008 riots.

Source: <https://athens.indymedia.org>

Riots in Greece – as well as recurrent incidents of clashing with the police in the area of Exarcheia– can be inscribed within the political culture of dissent and violent protesting in Greece, where political violence enjoys, to a certain extent, legitimacy from parts of the public, mostly located on the left of the political spectrum. Athens may have indeed been “[...] the European metropolis with the most barricades in the first decade of the new millennium” (Makrygianni & Tsavdaroglou, 2011, p. 39), nonetheless, the 2008 riots were unprecedented (and thus far unrepeated) in terms of range, duration and resonance. It soon became obvious that the killing of the 15-year-old boy, Alexandros Grigoropoulos, was the catalyst for the manifestation of latent social discontent and political crisis that had been dormant in Greek society. Police violence against minorities is often the most significant trigger in recent riots in the West (e.g. Paris 2005, London 2011, Ferguson 2014, Baltimore 2015), however, the Athens 2008 riots were distinctive in that they were not associated primarily with or directly claimed by a disadvantaged or marginalised community. The teenager who was killed was from a relatively prosperous background, and the anarchist groups that took the cause upon themselves, did not originate from a disadvantaged community. Indeed, their self-marginalization is arguably a political gesture of rejection of the current social system. In that sense, the Athens 2008 riots were not ‘bread riots’, but they were not community or commodity riots either. They were political, and more precisely ideological riots, which have certainly incorporated and expressed aspects of the struggle of disadvantaged communities,

<sup>1</sup>I use the terms riots and unrest interchangeably in this article, without, however, disregarding the fact that definitions are constitutive of the point of view of analysis of social phenomena. Thompson (1971) had cautioned against the loose employment of the term riots. Terms such as ‘uprising’ (Vradis & Dalakoglou, 2011), ‘insurrection’ (Gourgouris, 2010), ‘revolution or revolt’ (Iliopoulos, 2009) have also been employed to account for the 2008 events.

mainly immigrants in Greece<sup>2</sup>, but their central mode of expression was that of an ideological clash. The attacks against perceived symbols of consumerism, such as the Christmas tree at the Syntagma square, which was burnt and vandalised, is perhaps the clearest expression of the ideological commitment of these riots. The riots were the expression of those who felt that they had the political legitimacy to speak for the disadvantaged. Although the riots were indeed characterised to a certain extent by the radical heterogeneity of participants which made the dividing lines among the youth to disappear provisionally (Tsalikoglou, 2009), the main political force behind the 2008 events was the anarchist movement whose use of network activism (Vatikiotis, 2011) and alternative media (Miloni & Dionysis, 2011; Metropolitan Sirens, 2011) made the coordination and efficiency of attacks unprecedented.

Rising rates of unemployment, increasing public debt, expansion of precarious forms of employment and ever-growing and financially unsustainable consumerism are often mentioned as the material origins of the 2008 unrest, and indeed the Greek success story was shot through by these socio-economic features since the early years of the new millennium. The Greek economy seemed to be growing at the time, but "[...] it is not necessarily the growing pie that matters, but also the slices of the cake. And the slice of the cake for the €700 generation<sup>3</sup> was shrinking" (Kaplanis, 2011, p. 216). Taking into account that this broader picture offers a good basis for understanding why the specific event of Alexis Grigoropoulos's violent death was rapidly transformed into generalised unrest and became a vehicle of expression for those who were left outside the bubble of economic development. This is also why regarding the 2008 riots as a reaction to police brutality only, misses the point that police violence stood for a metonymy of the type

of social and economic pressure characterising the Greek society in the eve of the riots (Sotiris, 2010). However, I propose here to shift the emphasis from the social causes of riots to their legacy, to their impact on the political landscape in Greece, especially as, in an important way, 2008 is inextricably linked to the unrest that followed the country's entrance into the era of the IMF/EU/ECB memorandum. Therefore, the paper seeks to understand the riots in the *longue durée*, to relate the historical past of the key agents of the riots- i.e. the police and the anarchist movement – to their afterlives and as such to reveal their imprint on the political fabric in Greece. The article reads back the 2008 events as previews, or retroactive snapshots of the generalised crisis that Greece undergoes in the past six years by way of focusing, firstly, on the dominant discursive schemes that were used to make sense of the riots; and secondly on the key agents of the clashes, i.e. on the one hand the police – in particular on the way its historical legacy has defined the relationship between the police and the political spectrum in Greece, and because police violence was the trigger of the riots; and on the other hand, the anarchist movement – in particular its ideological weight, and because anarchism was the political force behind these specific riots but also of the unrest ever since.

#### The 2008 riots as metaphors of the past and the present in the present<sup>4</sup>

One of the many long-lasting effects of the 2008 unrest is reflected on the debate about the riots, which functioned as a metaphor of that existing at the time of the political divisions in Greece. In many ways, the 2008 events played a key role in redrawing the dividing political lines in Greece, which during the years of affluence at the beginning of the new millennium became invisible. Affluence and economic development as narratives tend to efface social difference and construct a post-ideological space, where politics is thought as a matter of bureaucratic efficiency rather than a space of often-opposed group interests as well as different and even conflicting visions of what a good society is.

The 2008 events brought to the fore the existing – disguised – social tensions and together

<sup>2</sup> To be sure, immigrants as a distinct social group did participate in the 2008 riots and for scholars such as Kalyvas (2010) their presence is the qualitative distinctive characteristic of the 2008 events. For Kalyvas (2010, p. 356) "[...] the foreign becomes the decisive factor, the central signifier for a fuller understanding of the unrests". During the 2008 unrest, "[...] immigrants became the informal citizens, citizens *de facto* but not *de jure*, that is, citizens against the law" (Kalyvas, 2010, p. 358) and as such "[...] the presence of the militant immigrant signifies a radical redefinition of the political community, a profound reconstitution of who is the demos, and a re-signification of the very idea and exercise of popular sovereignty" (Kalyvas, 2010, p. 360). Bratsis concurs that "[...] one of the greatest achievements of the December events are the linkages that have been formed between the current, largely immigrant and very urban, proletariat in Greece and the student, anarchist and other autonomous leftist movements" (Bratsis, 2010, p. 194). The figure of the immigrant-rioter was primarily recognized as a negative figure to be denounced, however, accounts from alternative media contest such dominant narratives (Miloni, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> The term refers to the suppression of salaries in the first decade of the new millennium, which mainly affected those between 20-40 years old, producing a new type of white-collar proletariat.

<sup>4</sup> I borrowed this expression from Maurice Bloch's famous 1977 article *The past and present in the present* (Bloch, 1977), which discusses the problem of social change and the theoretical importance of the past. However, here I am interested in the ideological uses of the past in the present and the dialectical relationship between the past and present which produces the 'present' using as a vehicle the different framings of the 2008 riots.

with this, different visions of the future. However, these visions of the future were not created *ex nihilo* either for the protesters and those who saw them with sympathy or for their ideological opponents. Despite their professed desire of newness and break with the past, the 2008 protesters drew largely on iconic moments of resistance, most notably the Polytechnic Uprising of 1973 and the 'Dekemvriana', the December 1944 month-long conflict in Athens, as well as international events, such as the May 1968, either in terms of poetics or in terms of the lexicon employed (Kornetis, 2010). As such, the 2008 events were romanticised as the living continuation of the Left resistance in the long history of struggles against capitalism, authoritarianism and the bourgeois State. But those who saw the 2008 events with unease, if not hostility, also drew from the past to explain what they saw as incomplete modernization (read Europeanization) of the Greek institutions and citizens, an interpretation that necessarily underplays the social and economic causes of the riots. As such, the 2008 events were treated as a consequence of the lack of modernizing reforms (Alivizatos, 2009), as lack of social responsibility (Veremis, 2008) or underdevelopment of the civil society (Mouzelis, 2008, 2009), as the symptoms of a problematic culture which institutionalises resistance and sanctifies lawlessness in the form of civil disobedience (Kalyvas, 2008) or as a certain hegemony of a 'popular democracy' ideology which leads the forces of the anti-systemic left to support political violence (Marantzidis, 2010a; Marantzidis, 2010b). These readings of the riots also draw from the past: their concerns are grounded in a perceived deficiency of modernizing spirit in Greece and as such, they originate in the foundational anxieties of the very institution of the Greek State in the nineteenth century. Their rejection of radicalism and idealisation of the 'West' or 'Europe' (Diamantouros, 1994; Mavrogordatos, 1997) reflects the two-centuries long identitarian conflict of whether Greece really belongs to the 'civilised' West or 'modern Europe' and professes an anxiety to demarcate the country from the 'backward Rest of the world'.

In both cases, the past, either as glorified resistance to capitalism, or as accumulation of missed opportunities of 'modernization' or 'Westernization', reconfigured historical themes not only reflected the past but constituted the present by becoming exemplary moments of 'revolutionary radicalism' or (lack of) 'liberal responsibility'. As such, the 2008 riots became

either a metaphor of perpetual resistance and hope of a new social order, or a metaphor of failed modernization that needed to be cured via softer or harder versions of repression. The Greek 2008 riots were ideological not only because of a particular perception of the police as an untrustworthy institution, not only because of the political significance of anarchism as guarantor of the spirit of resistance against the authoritarianism, but also because of the particular 'conflict of interpretations' with regards to their assessment and explanation. To be sure, the interpretation of recent riots in Europe, especially within the framework of 'criminality versus inequality', is also deeply ideological and consequently produces specific State responses and policies whilst it restructures the entire political landscape. However, the Greek peculiarity lies in the prioritization of history, of the past over the present – either as a tale of resistance or as a tale of incomplete Westernization – in the way the riots are claimed or rejected. It is this constant preoccupation with the country's orientation as well as the heavy weight of the recent history that make the Greek riots 'ideological', recurrent and yet atypical. The effects of the country's difficult relationship with the historical past are also reflected on the identity of the key players of the riots, i.e. the police and the anarchist movement, for whom the 2008 events were a catalyst as far as their role in the following years of the crisis is concerned.

#### **Legacy and (lack of) legitimacy: the public narratives of the police in the post-authoritarian years<sup>5</sup>**

Understanding the symbolic role of the police in the Greek political universe – and the persistent lack of political and ethical legitimacy it suffers from – requires a contextualization of the issue within the *longue durée* of policing politics in Greece in the twentieth century (Mazower, 1997; Mouzelis, 1979; Samatas, 1986; Veremis, 1997). Historically, the collective trauma of the Civil War (1946-1949), which followed the end of the Second World War, has rigidly defined the political identities and symbolic universes of the Left and Right in Greece. The political persecution of the Left in the years that followed the end of the Civil War has been associated in the collective memory of the Left with the police, as the instrument of the State implementing aspects of such persecution.

<sup>5</sup> The post-authoritarian years is a period commonly known as 'Metapolitefsi' (literally, political transition). Many see this period ending with the 2008 riots, others with the Greek crisis (2010) and yet others with the advent of Syriza – the radical Left coalition – to power in January 2015. In any case, there seems to be agreement that the era of Metapolitefsi has come to an end and Greece currently undergoes a period of transition.

Equally, the police has been used for the execution of practices of political repression in the interwar years, initially by the implementation of the law of *Idionomo* [Ἰδιώνυμο] in 1929, which penalised the support and dissemination of subversive - communist and anarchist - ideas; and subsequently by the 1936-1941 Metaxas dictatorship (the infamous 'statements of repentance' [ῥηλώσεις μετανοίας] and the institution of exile camps on isolated islands with the purpose of morally reforming dissenters, a practice also used by the post-Civil War regime. Later on, the Colonels' dictatorship (1967-1974), which ruthlessly suppressed the democratic political dissent in Greece, further consolidated the popular perception of the police as a repressive State apparatus. The loyalty of the police to the democratic regime that followed the collapse of the authoritarian rule was severely doubted and the institution was put under close political scrutiny, if not surveillance. As a result, police reforms that unified the two police bodies (Gendarmerie and Urban Police) institutionalised the dependence of the Chief of the Police under the designated cabinet Minister of Public Order (Zianikas, 1995). This structural change diminished the autonomy of the police and, consequently, the effectiveness of the service. The Minister of Public Order gives the general orders to and provides guidelines for the riot police as well, a body which personifies the suppression of violent State responses to protests and unrest and which is the main target during clashes. The suspicion towards the police as an institution is also mirrored in the denial of the right of the police to establish unions until the mid-1990s, making Greece the only country in the EU where the exercise of this democratic right was forbidden (Stergioulis, 2001). Another perverse effect of the lack of legitimacy of the police is that political representatives from the entire spectrum adopt a defensive position during incidents of clashes, which translates into a distinctively 'Greek' tolerance to the consequences of violence for the city, the citizens, the police and the protesters themselves. It also translates into the convenient use of the police as a scapegoat since Greek governments of all colours prefer not to assume the political cost of repression and to transfer that to the police, which appear misleadingly autonomous and self-directed.

The legacy of policing politics, despite the structural, in-depth institutional transformation in Greece after the collapse of the Colonels' regime, has overdetermined the way police is regarded by the political field today: as a guarantor and symbol

of traditional - and nationalist - values on the right side of the spectrum, or as a far Right sympathizer and para-State institution on the left side of the spectrum. These particular historical experiences, this authoritarian tradition of policing politics in the twentieth century, as well as the switching of the pendulum since the restoration of democracy in Greece towards an ideological hegemony of the Left (albeit not in terms of political power *per se*, until the recent electoral victory of Syriza in January 2015) have contributed not only towards mistrust, but often open hostility between the police and the progressive side of the political spectrum. For these reasons, the police has been occupying an almost structural role in the symbolic universe of Left political dissent, be it parliamentary, communist, extra-parliamentary, or with anarchist leanings. The almost ritualistic evocation of the symbolic rejection of the police during public protests is perhaps the most obvious manifestation of this ideological trend. The famous slogan 'και τώρα ένα σύνθημα που όλους μας ενώνει, μπάτσοι, γουρούνια, δολοφόνοι', translating 'and now a slogan which unite us all, cops, pigs, murderers' in its countless variations, is perhaps the most instructive manifestation of the symbolic role of the police in the universe of Left dissent in Greece. Even though forty years have passed since the restoration of democratic political life in Greece the idea that the police uphold authoritarian political views is widespread and willingly not challenged given the importance that such idea holds in structuring the dividing lines between the Left and Right. The persistence of political terrorism in Greece (Kassimeris, 2001, 2013) which often takes the police as its primary target, along with the peculiar cultural understandings of lawfulness - where the law is not seen as absolutely prohibiting or set in stone but as negotiable and malleable, and its institutional representatives are seen with suspicion - have further contributed to consolidating popular representations of 'the police versus the people' cliché.

This fundamental mistrust was reflected in the 2008 riots too. Even though police inefficiency was frequently criticised by groups of citizens, politicians and intellectuals after violent incidents during demonstrations, public attitudes towards police authority were ambivalent. The restoration of the democratic rule in 1974 did not result into the equivalent restoration of the general distrust and disrespect for authority, and, hence, improving the efficiency of the police by unavoidably increasing its powers and authority was never a popular cause in Greece (Close, 2009).

The obvious target of the 2008 unrest was the police force. The public at large did not see the killing as the transgression of one police officer but interpreted the incident as a telling instance of systemic police brutality and, hence, accused the police as a whole for allowing officers such as Grigoropoulos's murderer to operate in this manner through the institution. As such, the police was seen at the time of the 2008 unrest as both a symptom and cause of political failure (Featherstone, 2009).

The 2008 events had an enormous negative effect on the police itself: despite the fact that Epameinondas Korkoneas, the special guard who shot Grigoropoulos received a life sentence, the public did not regain its trust to the police. Grigoropoulos's death comes back as the haunting event that ratified the suspicion against the police as an obscure, para-State institution with authoritarian sympathies and a deficiency of democratic political ethic. The rise of the far right party Golden Dawn and the association of members of the police force with its ideology and activities (Christopoulos, 2014; Psarras, 2012) in the years that followed the 2008 riots further consolidated the perception of the police as an enemy of democracy and as an institution ridden by an authoritarian, racist and violent culture. The 2008 events also had an impact on the organisation and policing of protests as well: the riots legitimised both violent types of protesting which took *a priori* the police as their main target as well as violent responses from the State. Riot police grew in number and their presence became constant and given regardless of the type of protest and of the kind of demonstrators. In 2009, a special highly mobile repressive motorcycle police unit, DELTA, was instituted, which has rapidly become the privileged target of anarchist and extra-parliamentary groups as well as highly controversial due to its harsh approach and methods. This was coupled by the introduction of a new legislation, known as 'the hood's law' (κουκουλονόμος) which dictated that all petty crimes committed by protesters in hoods or balaclavas would receive an enhanced sentence. The deterioration of the relationship between the police and the protesting public is clearly an effect not only of the 2008 riots as an event but also of the way their afterlives defined the profile of political life in the successive turbulent years. The choice of the State to harden the police response to the civic unrest that followed the Greek crisis – overuse of special police forces against protesters and over-policing of all kinds of demonstrations –

did little to dispel the public's mistrust of the police and further established its negative image.

#### **The role and significance of the anarchist subculture in Greece**

If the place that the police as an institution occupies in the Greek ideological imaginary has certain particularities given the recent political history of the country, anarchism as a political force occupies a peculiar place in the opposite side of the fence. If, on the one hand, the Greek police lack ethical and political legitimacy sometimes across the political spectrum, Greek anarchism enjoys peculiar political and ethical legitimacy – sometimes way beyond its natural – admittedly small – active following. The configuration of the anarchist milieu – people, organisation, activity – is such that it is commonly referred to as a 'space' [χώρος] rather than a movement or a scene (Boukalas, 2011). Anarchist groups became considerably visible in the aftermath of the restoration of the democratic rule and the Polytechnic Uprising in 1973<sup>6</sup>. Although anarchism has long historical roots in Greece that go back to the nineteenth century (Megas, 1994; Pomonis, 2004; Sotiros, 2004), a specific anarchist subculture emerged at the aftermath of the Polytechnic Uprising. The urban guerrilla tactics of the anarchist groups as well as their commitment to revolutionary change and unwillingness to join the organised parliamentary spectrum gained them an attitude of tolerance, if not sympathy and sometimes admiration, from across the Left side of the political spectrum<sup>7</sup>. Despite the endless animosity between different understandings around the meaning, purpose and tactics of Left politics, despite the eternal division of the political space that we call 'the Left', and even clashes between the Communist Youth and anarchist groups in demonstrations, the anarchists are often seen as a more 'pure' and, hence, revolutionary political force, perhaps because of their

<sup>6</sup> The Polytechnic Uprising refers to the protest by university students against the junta regime in 1973, which escalated into a popular uprising and into the occupation of Athens Polytechnic. The occupation lasted for three days and it was violently suppressed when an army tank crashed the front gate in November 17<sup>th</sup> resulting in the death of numerous protesters. Despite the fact that the regime lasted several months after the Polytechnic event, it holds a prominent symbolic place in the popular memory and collective narratives of resistance. It is commemorated yearly with demonstrations that traditionally end-up with minor or major clashes with the police. The famous far-left terrorist group '17 November' which acted in Greece for almost two decades draws its name by this event and its legacy as a prime moment of resistance politics in Greece.

<sup>7</sup> According to a survey of 2002, 22% of the Greek public sympathised with the anarchist anti-authoritarian and anti-capitalist views although very few sympathised with terrorist methods (Close, 2009), whilst similar views were popular not only within Syriza – a minor far left political party at the time – but also within the left wing of PASOK, the Socialist Party which had dominated the Greek political scene since 1981 (Zeri, 2009).

undisciplined stance and suspicion of all forms of bourgeois democracy.

This particular anarchist subculture with counter-cultural and bohemian characteristics emerged around Exarcheia Square, a real hub for activists groups and those social, political and cultural actors which form the so-called 'alternative milieu' in Greece (Vatikiotis, 2011). The geographical proximity of Exarcheia square to the Polytechnic is also significant: Greek universities are protected by asylum law meaning that police intervention is prohibited, which is a unique Greek particularity (Karran, 2007) and another manifestation of the institutional and political mistrust towards the police as discussed above. The Greek 'asylum law' symbolised the 'legitimising moment' for the restoration of the democratic rule in the 1980s but its institutionalisation also meant the facilitation of a culture of rioting as a means of protest (Andronikidou & Kovras, 2012)<sup>8</sup>.

The Polytechnic school has functioned ever since as a safe haven for groups clashing with the police and the 'asylum law' has been a privileged terrain of ideological and political friction between the Left and the Right<sup>9</sup>. Clashes between the anarchists and the police systematically take place – unmistakably after demonstrations and protests of all types – in the area of Exarcheia, which is considered as an anarchist stronghold. Clashes have resulted in deaths of protesters associated with the anarchist movement and they hold iconic status in the imaginary of resistance and the police versus the anarchist's antagonism: in 1980, Iakovos Koumis and Stamatina Kanellopoulou were clubbed to death, whereas in 1985, 15-year-old Michalis Kaltezas was shot dead by a 25-year old police officer. These instances of police violence are constitutive of what has become a vendetta between the anarchist movement and the police, and they hold considerable symbolic value in legitimising clashes with the police as defence against State brutality, a view well summarised by the popular slogan 'violence to the violence of the State power' [βία στην βία της εξουσίας]. As such, Alexis Grigoropoulos's death only added to this ongoing vendetta, even more as it did not occur during a clash. As anarchist scholars Makrygianni

and Tsavdaroglou explain, Exarcheia has had a symbolic meaning for the anarchist movement: the very presence of the police has been regarded as an intrusion to a "[...] ground occupied by the antagonistic movement [...]" and the murder of Grigoropoulos was read as a murderous attack against the entire neighbourhood (Makrygianni & Tsavdaroglou, 2011, p. 40) and, hence, against the anarchist movement itself. The fact that the death of Grigoropoulos occurred in Exarcheia explains to a large extent why and how the anarchist movement found itself at the forefront – at the leadership if that would be an accurate term for anarchist political ethics – of the 2008 Athens unrest.

However, if 'December'<sup>10</sup> – as the unrest is commonly referred to by anarchists – as an 'event' (Kallianos, 2011)<sup>11</sup> was indeed a historic moment for the movement, if it was the antagonistic instance *par excellence* where general uprising seemed possible, 'December' was also a turning point for Greek anarchism in a different sense. Anarchist scholars notice that both local and global developments were catching up with the Greek anarchist movement. On the local level, the introduction of the concept of the anarchist as anti-democrat, created for the first time in Athens 2009, and the 'fetishisation of the revolutionary identity' as socio-political self-indulgence which isolated politically, ideologically and socially the anarchist movement, led to one of the most tragic events in the Greek history of protests (Boukalas, 2011). On the 5th of May 2012, during one of the most widely attended demonstrations following a general strike call in the midst of the economic crisis in Greece, members of an anarchist group fired a petrol bomb to a Marfin bank branch leading to the death of three employees. The 'Marfin events' as they have been known since marked a turning point not only in the attendance and frequency of protests which dropped significantly, but also in the ideological legitimacy that the anarchist movement enjoyed until that moment. Following global developments, the

<sup>8</sup>Andronikidou and Kovras (2012) argue that the particularity of the Greek transition to democracy shaped a culture of sympathy to acts of resistance against the state, a culture which – since the restoration of the democratic rule in 1974 – has been institutionalised and reproduced. Anastasakis (2009) concurs that public demonstrations and the violence associated with them have become a regular pattern in Greek politics.

<sup>9</sup>Karamichas (2008, p. 291) notices that whilst it is not unusual for activists making best use of whichever resources are available to them, "[...] in the case of Athens Polytechnic, though, owing to its prominent place in the historiography of youth rebellions from the not so distant past, we might talk of a revolutionary fetishism".

<sup>10</sup>This term is not merely a chronological description of the time when the riots occurred. It refers to 'Dekemvriana' (the word derives from the word December), a term used to describe collectively the 33-day-long fighting between the Communist-led resistance group EAM/ELAS and government forces, supported by the British allied troops stationed in Athens in 1944, just after the end of the Second World War. The fighting started after the massacre of an unarmed crowd during a pro-Communist demonstration and resulted in a violent civil conflict. The 'Dekemvriana' led to the Varkiza agreement in January 1945 that called for the complete demobilization of ELAS and the events are regarded as the prelude to the civil war of 1946–1949.

<sup>11</sup>Kallianos uses the term 'event' in the sense given by the radical philosopher Alain Badiou, where the event is a transformational experience, a moment of rupture which affects radically all later socio-political relations constituting the milieu because for a moment it disengages the subject by his/her past experiences.



Greek anarchist movement was gradually leaving behind its revolutionary commitment to universal insurrection in favour of identity politics and an emphasis on form and life-style (Trocchi, 2011). Such ideological developments did not allow the movement to become a real force of change in Greek society; nonetheless, they defined the nature of the attacks of such groups in the years to come: the decreasing number and appeal of protests were countered with an increased intensity of attacks during the protests and the generalisation of quasi-warfare tactics. In that sense, then, if 'December' was a harbinger of the crisis of Greek State, Greek economy and Greek politics of all tendencies, it was a harbinger of the crisis of the anarchist movement itself as well (Lynteris, 2011).

### Conclusion

This article attempted to look at the legacy of the riots in defining the political landscape in Greece in the aftermath of the 2008 events. The article examined the effects of the riots on the structure of the political debate in Greece since 2008 and demonstrated that the conceptual schemes used to appropriate or dismiss ideologically the political content of the events – i.e. anti-systemic resistance versus incomplete modernization – brought to the fore both the deep-rooted political divisions in Greece as well as the opposed political visions for Greece. The article looked at both the police and the anarchist movement as the key actors in the 2008 drama and examined the ways this particular event has transformed their role in the following years, which were marked by an unprecedented economic and political crisis in Greece. The article demonstrated that the lack of political legitimacy in Greece turned the event of Grigoropoulos's death into generalised unrest but also created a rupture in the relationship between the public and the police, which thus far, has been unrepaired. It also showed that for the anarchist movement that, for historical but also circumstantial reasons, found itself at the forefront of the riots, the 2008 events were also a harbinger of its own transformation and crisis. The failure of the anarchist movement to appeal to the masses was compensated by the increased violence of attacks, which led to their own political de-legitimation. In retrospective, the 2008 events triggered a still ongoing process of total transformation of the Greek political landscape and 'December 2008' should be considered as the real beginning of the Greek crisis in terms of historical periodization.

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