State repression, social resistance and the politicization of public space in Greece under fiscal adjustment

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The article discusses the politicization of public space in Greece since the outbreak of the crisis and under the program of fiscal adjustment. In particular, it discusses the ways in which public space became a fundamental field of political action for different social forces; on the one hand for the governments that imposed the austerity policies since 2010 and on the other for those who resisted such measures with protests, rallies, solidarity initiatives etc. In the first case, austerity and fiscal discipline were combined with policies of law and order and symbolic policies of "cleaning" the urban space of people considered as "threatening" (immigrants, HIV positive women, drug users). In the second case, several forms of resistance to austerity emerged which utilized public space as a field of social struggle with the state and those political forces that imposed austerity within a post-democratic framework of political decision making. As it is argued, this twofold instrumentalization of public space is reminiscent of Karl Polanyi's concept of the "double movement", illustrating a – more intense in times of crisis – conflict between the needs of the economy and those of the society.

1. THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF THE AUSTERITY AGREEMENTS

The main priorities of the agreements ("Memoranda of Understanding") signed between the Greek governments and Troika (ECB, EC, IMF) since

the outbreak of the crisis in 2009 have been the reduction of public deficit, the shrinking of the public sector, plans for the privatization of the remaining publicly owned enterprises and state assets as well as a series of closures of public organizations and mergers, for instance through the so-called "Kallikratis plan", which dictated the merger of local communities in order to form larger administrative units. But, most importantly, the austerity policies aimed at the deregulation of labour through the "internal devaluation" strategy. Within four years such a strategy instituted rapid reductions in wages, pensions and benefits from 20% up to 50%, a barrage of emergency taxes and the reduction of the personnel at the public sector, for instance through the measure of "labour reserve" (a form of dismissal of employees) or the "one to ten" law, dictating that, in the public sector, only one person can be hired for ten retirements.

The austerity measures have put the Greek economy in a recession spiral and caused severe blows to labour and labour rights. Regarding collective agreements, it has been decided that enterprise-wide agreements will override sectoral and national collective agreements. This has set the basis for regulations favoring individual bargaining. Also, the notice period for dismissal and the amount of severance pay were reduced, the mass layoff limit was increased and the regulations concerning "unfair dismissal" were loosened. These measures widened the reach of labour flexibilization and precarization, as it is shown, for instance, by the rise (in the first two years of the crisis) in uninsured labour from 22.6% to 30.4% of the labour force in the private sector, an increase even more intense among immigrant workers (SEPE 2012).

Under these conditions, unemployment has skyrocketed, reaching 28% in November 2013 (Eurostat 2014), with long term and very long term unemployment, as well as female and youth unemployment reaching shocking highs. The pauperization of the population was rapid. In only one year (2010-2011), the median income and poverty threshold fell by 8% but, despite this, the population under that threshold increased still further, from 19 to 21% (Eurostat 2013). A series of small and medium enterprises, which have traditionally constituted the core of the Greek economy could not stand recession, lack of liquidity and increased taxes. As a result, more than 65.000 of such enterprises have closed down only in the first months of the crisis (Mylonas 2011: 8) and this number has since been multiplied.

Although the austerity measures have spatially disparate effects on incomes, affecting the least developed regions most (Monastiriotis 2011: 330), a general image prevails. It is that of cities and urban centers being strongly hit by the crisis due to the dramatic cuts and staff reductions in local government that have severely undermined urban and municipal infrastructure and caused the degradation of living standards for local communities and populations. In addition, emergency taxes have had indirect effects for the urban environment, as in Memorandum I it was decided that the price of heating oil should be equal to the price of diesel fuel. This meant a 40% increase in prices for consumers and a drop in consumption of heating oil by 75% in winter 2012 (Dabilis, 2013). Consumers turned massively to the use of electrical heating appliances and wood for their fireplaces and stoves. This led to a dramatic increase of smog and suspended particles by 200% in urban areas (ibid.), with such effects as allergies and respiratory problems, as well as, in some cases, fatal accidents.

At the same time, familialistic strategies of home provision to younger members, which traditionally constituted a fundamental means of social reproduction supplementing poor social protection and a weak welfare state in Greece, are now shaken, as more and more jobs are lost, wages no longer suffice for hundreds of people to repay their loans, and pensions are drastically reduced. In such a setting, houses are abandoned or lose the value they had some years ago, while homelessness has increased dramatically (Alamanou et. al., 2011). Next to the "traditional" homeless, mainly consisting of poor, socially marginalized unemployed, and the "hidden" immigrant homelessness, now stands a new generation of "neohomeless", including persons with a middle or higher educational background, with a former satisfactory standard of living and previously, of a medium social level.

Overall, the crisis and the austerity program have caused a serious social deregulation in the country with the number of people committing suicide increasing (Kentikelenis et. al., 2011), households being strongly hit by pauperization, the youth being unable to enter the labour market, thousands of people migrating to other countries, and the majority of the population suffering income decreases and a rapid degradation of living standards, within a post-democratic, technocratic governance based on the attempt to set market needs and priorities above the societal ones. Unsurprisingly, these austerity policies and the shock-therapy since

2010 have caused a wave of different forms of social resistance not only by official trade unions that reacted by means of hundreds of strikes[1], but also by various, heterogeneous social groups that participated with massive numbers in a series of demonstrations and rallies. Some of the most characteristic forms of resistance, manifested at the urban public space, are summarized in the following section[2].

2. RESISTING THE AUSTERITY PROGRAM

For the manifestations of social resistance, public space did not simply serve purposes of visibility and representation, but became the arena of "radical politics" (Kallianos 2013: 549). Streets did not merely operate as spaces for the self-awareness and the political socialization of citizens, but as spaces of confrontation with the state, where "the hegemonic Other" was contested and "where most of the battles were fought" (ibid.: 554-555). One of the most important moments of social resistance to austerity was what became known as the "movement of the squares" that made its debut at the end of May 2011, in front of the Parliament building at Syntagma square. Within a few days, protests, popular assemblies and sit-ins spread to other districts of the capital and other cities with the explicit aim to deter the vote of the Midterm Fiscal Strategy (a package of austerity measures to cope with unmet fiscal targets of the previous year).

During a general strike on June 15, 2011, the protesters managed to retain control of Syntagma square, despite heavy police repression sufficiently severe to be criticized by Amnesty International (2011a). This kind of resistance strengthened the dynamics of the protest. However, the next general strike of June 28-29, 2011, and the encirclement of the Parliament called for by the Greek "Indignants" did not prevent the approval of the Midterm Fiscal Strategy and the protesters, once again,

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1 | For instance, only in 2011, there have been 91 strikes in the public sector and 240 in the private sector – mostly within firms but also across professional categories or whole sectors or branches of the economy (Katsoridas/Lampousaki 2012).

2 | For instance, the rally that took place in Athens during the general strike on 19.-20.10.2011 has been estimated to be the largest in the last forty years (Katsoridas/Lampousaki 2012).

faced violent repression and clashed with the police (see Amnesty International 2011b). The movement faded a month later, but open popular assemblies continued to operate in other districts of Athens and other cities across the country until at least the next year (Pantazidou 2012: 12).

At the same time, several other practices were set in motion, such as the occupation of social spaces (e.g. the continuation of the public national TV broadcaster by its staff, and transmission via the internet, after the government announced its closure and the dismissal of hundreds of employees, leading to continuous protests outside the broadcaster's central premises for many weeks; the occupation of the local general hospital at the district of Kilkis and its re-opening on the basis of self-management and free health care); grassroots initiatives and informal citizen networks to provide relief from some of the effects of the crisis (e.g. social kitchens for the cooking and distribution of free food to unemployed, homeless, immigrants etc., social clinics and social pharmacies established by doctors, nurses and pharmacists as a response to the dramatic degradation of the public health system due to spending cuts, closures or merger of health units, services of free tutoring etc.), and local exchange networks (e.g. exchange of services or products, either mediated by new virtual currencies or directly in a barter-like fashion or in the form of give away, free of charge initiatives) (for an overview of the new initiatives, movements etc. see Filopoulou 2012, Wainwright 2013, Malkoutzis 2013, Oikonomides 2013).

Notably, since the outbreak of the crisis, the tendency to present various problems, economic or social, as problems of "security" against a series of heterogeneous "threats" has intensified. For the Eurozone elites, the Greek "disease" had to be cured by the program of fiscal discipline, in order to avoid "contagion" of the "virus". For the justification of the treatment, several narratives were used, e.g. about Greece as a rent-seeking society living beyond its means (Markantonatou, 2013). But the politics of stigmatization were equally implemented at the domestic level, with public space serving as a field of state repression. As specific social groups and individuals such as migrants, HIV positive women and drug users were defined in different contexts as "threats" to society, the arguments about the need for fiscal adjustment were combined with strategies of law and order and securitization, for which the rhetoric of scapegoating and social stigmatization were used. Some of the ways in which the program of fiscal adjustment and austerity was combined with politics of law and order are described in the following section.

3. GOVERNING PUBLIC SPACE BY SCAPEGOATING

Since December 2008, when three weeks of protests and unrest spread throughout the country after a 15-year-old high school student was shot dead by a policeman, policies were implemented to empower the police forces, by increasing their number and establishing new units. By 2010, a new special corps was formed, often consisting of former military staff with a nationalist orientation. This explains to a certain degree the political preferences for the neo-Nazi group 'Golden Dawn' within the police force (To Vima 2012a), as well as the tolerance towards actions of racist activism of several so called "residents' committees" in certain areas of Athens (e.g. closing down a playground visited by migrants, anti-migrant patrol groups, attacks towards offices of ethnic communities etc.) (see Kandylis and Kavoulakos 2011: 158-159). Since the outbreak of the crisis, this tolerance became compatible with the hardening of the official migratory policy, as shown, for instance, by the construction of a 12,5 kilometer fence along Greece's North borders in order to prevent migrants entering the country, or by the increase of the percentage of foreign prisoners in Greek prisons, rising from 48% in 2008 to 63% in 2012 (Ministry of Justice 2014).

In the conjuncture of the economic crisis, in which the government's power to decide on the most important dimensions of economic policy shrunk drastically, the rhetoric of national sovereignty and internal security was revived, as shown, for example, by the central role that migration politics had in the 2012 pre-electoral campaign. This was, actually, the case not only for the neo-Nazi political group 'Golden Dawn' with their slogan "to clean the filth [the migrants] from the city", but also for the social democratic party PASOK which, for instance, linked the risk of robberies to the poor living conditions of immigrants and the supposed threat posed by the latter to public health (Xenakis and Cheliotis 2013: 301). Similarly, the right-wing's Nea Demokratia pre-electoral campaign was based on the demand, as the party's president, A. Samaras (see Vima 2012b) put it, to "take our cities back from migrants". His campaign was also based on two promises; the first was to "deport immediately all illegal migrants", and the second, to renegotiate the Memoranda austerity agreements. While the latter was hardly realized or even discussed after the elections, several measures were taken for the former.

Indeed, some months after the election of Nea Demokratia as a leading governmental party, the so called "Operation Xenios Zeus",

ironically named after the ancient Greek God of hospitality, was carried out in several Greek cities. Within one year, more than 80.000 migrants were detained and transferred to empty factories, military camps and police stations for paper checks and interrogations. After being subjected to several processes of identification and control, migrants were released, until the next unannounced "stop and search" check. Notably, Human Rights Watch (2013) criticized the Xenios Zeus operation for police brutality and stressed that finally only 6% of those inspected were illegal immigrants, despite the government's polemic language against "illegal migration".

As Agamben (2005: 14) has described in detail, the tendency towards the generalization of the security paradigm as a technique of governance is characteristic of today's societies. In the case of Greece, the new emphasis on social control, law and order and policing has been part of the broader agenda of the "state of emergency" that has been more or less implicitly declared during the crisis by the different governments that imposed the austerity policies. In specific cases, the state of emergency mobilized the exercise of a biopolitical power for heterogeneous aims and combined for instance medical care for public health with a need to "clean the city" from people defined as threatening or morbid. According to the government's narrative, this kind of "cleaning" would benefit tourism and entrepreneurial activity and, supposedly, the Greek economy. The basic function, however, of the state of emergency was social disciplination and the making of social order in times of unrest.

Characteristically, during the May 2012 pre-electoral campaign and amidst one of the most serious financial crises of the last decades, there was a wave of arrests of HIV positive sex workers, broadcasted live on television. While authorities had hardly been interested in the issue for many years, there was suddenly an intense campaign of demonization of the HIV positive women held in custody who were described in several mass media as "dirty", "sick" and "dangerous" and were further blamed for the image of decadence of the Athens city center. According to A. Loverdos, Minister of Health at that time, these prostitutes "had to be deported immediately", because "they harmed the institution of family". Some days before the crucial 2012 elections, he stated that "the virus is transferred from the illegal woman directly to the Greek family" (see PICUM, 2012). Photos, names, age, land of origin and details about the womens' and their parents' life histories were shown in newspapers and

on television, while a series of police press releases warned about this new "state of emergency".

The method of penalization of HIV positive women was soon extended to other groups of people that were considered as threatening. "Operation Thetis", a joint action between the Greek police and the Hellenic Center for Disease Control and Prevention of the Ministry of Health conducted in 2013 and named after the Greek goddess of Justice, targeted drug users in a spirit similar to that of "Operation Xenios Zeus". Drug users were treated as a kind of urban virus to be cured by the police in cooperation with several agents of public health. Aim of the operation was "to gather drug addicts who wandered in the city center and transfer them to police's concentration infrastructure in order to conduct a census", as well as to "clear" the city center from people who were "using drugs in public" (see OKANA, 2013). In this frame, hundreds of drug users were arrested and taken to distant detention centers where they were obliged to take a medical examination, and then were released (see Exiles in Balkans, 2013).

One more strategy of the governments that imposed the austerity measures, especially of the conservative Nea Demokratia, was to present several leftist forms of protest as equally "extreme" and "dangerous" for the political system and democracy as those tactics of the neo-Nazi group Golden Dawn. This "theory of the two extremes", as the term was established in the Greek mass media discussion, suggested that both leftist and neo-fascist political forces attempted to challenge the state's authority and put the country in a course of political destabilization. As racist physical violence exerted on migrants by neo-fascists was equated with leftist protests against austerity , the government attempted to appear as the sole guarantor of the country's constitutional order and political stability.

This is also how the police operations against squats were justified. The Minister of Public Order and Citizen Protection, N. Dendias, required the police to "reoccupy squats" and stressed that "law and order is neither a governmental agenda, nor a political slogan, but it is a constitutional obligation and right of every Greek citizen" (see Ta Nea, 2013). In this period, from late 2012 to the end of September 2013, police raided and closed down various squats in the cities of Athens, Thessaloniki, Patra and Ioannina. Dozens of people were detained and many of them arrested. Since then, the government of Nea Demokratia has been using this "theory of the two extremes" not only as an argument against the major leftwing

opposition, but also as a means of social disciplination against protesters, squatters and others who were presented in the public discourse as people in conflict with the law, causing anomie and challenging the constitutional order, similar to the actions of the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn.

4. Concluding Remarks

Karl Polanyi used the term "double movement" to describe a conflictual interplay or tension between economy and society that he understood as inherent in market liberalism. He defined the "double movement" as "the action of two organizing principles in society, each of them setting itself specific institutional aims, having the support of definite social forces and using its own distinctive methods" (Polanyi 2001: 138). The first organizing principle, economic liberalism, was supported by entrepreneurial classes and aimed at the establishment of a self-regulating market. The second principle concerned social protection for all those disadvantaged by the market and aimed at the conservation of man, nature and society. Polanyi set the double movement in the historical context of 19th century's liberalism when a "Great Transformation", as he called it in his homonymous book, took place. This transformation started with a marketization process that followed the abolition, in 1834, of the Speenhamland system that had managed to keep wages low by means of allowances proportional to the price of wheat. With the abolition of Speenhamland and the Poor Law reform, the poor were entitled to an allowance, only if committed to the workhouses, which in the meantime, had become places of social coercion and immiseration. These measures, which led to an unprecedented pauperization, aimed at the establishment of a competitive labour market no longer at a local level, but at a national one and set the basis for the expansion of capitalism. According to Polanyi (ibid: 3), this 'great transformation' ended with the "collapse of the nineteenth century civilization", as he put it, during the 1930s crisis.

However, the gradual deregulation of the welfare state and the attack on labour rights since the mid-1970s disproves Polanyi's view that the vision of a self-regulating market was over with the 1930s crash. Four decades of neoliberalization have shown that the vision of self-regulating markets has not been exhausted. This is observable also in the frame of the Eurozone, having a neoliberal orientation already since its establishment.

Especially since 2010, when measures were deployed, ranging from the socialisation of bank losses to the imposition of austerity packages and fiscal discipline in several countries of the Eurozone and more intensively in Greece, this neoliberal orientation broadened. The Eurozone's elites did not challenge the doctrine of the self-regulating market, the consequences of which have been described by Polanyi. On the contrary, these elites rushed to deepen its institutional setting as shown, for instance, by the Six Pact in October 2011 or the Fiscal Compact in December 2011, which dictate automatic sanctions in case of non-compliance with the Eurozone's rules of fiscal discipline.

If Polanyi's concept of the "double movement" is understood as an ideal-type, it can then be set in the historical conjuncture of the crisis in Greece, in which it acquires a clear spatial dimension. For market supporters and political forces imposing fiscal discipline, public space served as a strategic means to promote an unprecedented neoliberal shock-therapy through strategies of social discipline. For those social groups hit by the crisis and those dependent on the remaining welfare state and with no other option than to resist the austerity measures, public space became an arena of conflict and struggle with the state as well as a field for social solidarity. The forms of social resistance in Greece, though heterogeneous or fragmented as they often have been, express in their complexity, mutatis mutandis, what Polanyi described as the "realistic self-protection of society" and are to be added to the overall history of the "universal 'collectivist' reaction against the expansion of market economy (…)" (Polanyi 2001: 157).

How a "double movement" develops further in the Greek context, as the crisis in unfolding, or how such a counter-movement is to be interpreted are open questions. Whether forces struggling for more market liberalization, labour flexibilization and welfare deregulation will prevail, and under what conditions, over those fighting for social rights and democracy depends on social struggle and pressure put on the state. As an outcome of the crisis, public space is being politicized, although this does not mean it did not have a political dimension before the crisis. On the contrary, public space has always been political. In the conjuncture of the crisis, however, public space has become one of the most crucial and urgent stakes for conflicting social actors, a site where the demands of those resisting are articulated in order to emerge as the fundamental responses to the crisis and neoliberal austerity.

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