An Anomaly?
Some Reflections on the Greek December 2008

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As Solon saw that the city was often in a condition of civic strife, while some of the citizens through laziness were content to let things slide, he laid down a law to deal with them, enacting that whoever when civic strife prevailed did not join forces with either party was to be disfranchised and not to be a member of the city.

Aristotle

“Whoever will be free must make himself free. Freedom is no fairy gift to fall into a man’s lap.”

Max Stirner

It all started on a winter Saturday evening, December 6th, 2008, with the senseless shooting of a fifteen year old Alexis Grigoropoulos, by a patrolling police guard at a congested district in central Athens. This “incident” sparked spontaneous collective mobilizations against police brutality, first at the very site of the crime and its immediate surroundings to finally engulf the entire country in nationwide mass protests, widespread riots, sit-ins and occupations, clashes with law enforcement, and extensive looting that lasted three weeks. Greece was faced with the worst unrests and disorder in several decades. In fact, what unfolded that eventful Saturday night “was no ordinary protest,” and in many ways was unprecedented and incomparable to any previous civic disturbance in post-World War II Greece. By now, most designate these events as the “December riots.”

How can we make sense of them? What were their conditions of possibility? After all, political riots of that scale seemed to have been eliminated from Greek politics, relegated to a less developed past of political immaturity. Could this suggest that although politically defeated and historically exhausted, these confrontational and agonistic forms of extra-institutional politics might be in the process of reappearing? Furthermore, to what grievances did the unrest speak? And how do we understand its political meaning and effects? How can we interrogate its provocations and consider its implications? Are we at the beginning of new political realignments, new forms of civic contestation and participation, new social struggles?

I.

As a particular correlation of mere “facts,” what happened is exemplary by itself, out of the normal order of things. I begin, therefore, with some factual observations on the protests’ velocity, duration, size, range, intensity, and composition.

First, there is the temporal factor. The sheer speed, the momentum with which a conglomeration of disparate individuals and groups spontaneously came together, gathered for the
same reasons at a common place, and acted in concert is striking. Within the hour, beginning at a particular location, a thousand people assembled. With the instantaneous use of information and communication technologies, time was compressed and interaction accelerated. Several demonstrations were quickly set in motion and violent confrontations among growing number of protesters and the police erupted in many parts of central Athens. Hours later, thousands protested by throwing petrol bombs, clashing with the police, erecting barricades, blocking highways, and setting fires. On Monday morning, universities and schools were occupied, strikes announced, and pamphlets and manifestos were distributed as the participants negotiated their autonomy and role in the events. In terms of its temporal expression, the unrest is exceptional for an additional reason. It is not only how fast the protests formed and proliferated and how rapidly conflict and violence spread. It is also for how long they lasted: three weeks, with many episodes and turns, but noticeably longer than any previous unrest since the restoration of liberal democracy in 1974.

Second, the protests were also unusual from a spatial perspective as well. Their political geography was stunning. They covered most of the national territory with rallies and riots sweeping rather evenly across Greece. Within hours of the killing, Athens was no longer an isolated phenomenon. Similar demonstrations were reported in other Greek cities, including Thessaloniki, Ioannina, Komotini, Kastoria, Drama, Xanthi, Kavala, Patra, Kozani, Alexandroupoli, Mytilene, Larisa, Tripoli, Volos, Trikala, Agrinio, Corfu, Piraeus, Chania, Heraklion, Rhodes, Karditsa, Lamia, Styliada, Lagkadas, and Corinth. All the large cities were involved, urban areas and towns, islands, stretching from north to south and from west to east, including, surprisingly, the agricultural heartland and the rural borderlands. As many as forty-four cities were caught in the conflict. As new clashes erupted, the crisis became national and the entire political map was redrawn.

Size is a third fact to consider. A larger than expected number of participants became involved, physically present, acting with enough coordination to occupy a common symbolic ground and to organize demonstrations and rallies. Although spontaneous, informal, and heterogeneous, speaking in many voices and acting with many hands, these gatherings and encounters coalesced into a collective, extra-institutional action that involved thousands, a plural crowd and a multitude of sorts. From the point of view of mass, there were days with more than 100,000 participants nationwide, some 600 schools and 150 university facilities across the country occupied, and numerous labor unions, civil associations, NGO’s, and social movements in daily strikes and marches. The protests had a substantial presence.

Naturally, by the mere fact of mass participation, the December events evoke the famous student uprising against military rule in November 1973. But notwithstanding some interesting similarities, caution is called for. Independently of whether the anti-dictatorial struggles begun what the present protests were in the process of ending, there is one critical difference between then and now that determines, to an important degree, the singular meaning of these recent events. It is a difference between dictatorship and a democratic state of law. It is the difference of democracy. In the early 1970s, the uprising was responding to the overthrow of democracy and the usurpation of legitimate power. It was defined by a concrete enemy: the illegal and authoritarian military government. Resistance, thus, was mostly articulated in terms of democratic legitimacy, constitutional legality, and popular-national sovereignty. Since then, the political situation in Greece has drastically changed. It is now a democratic constitutional state, a parliamentary liberal republic with a fairly long historical record of political stability, free elections, and multiparty competition. The unrest thus played out on a very different political terrain, including that of liberal democracy itself. It erupted within a constitutional state of rights. In fact, it broke out in the midst of a rather stable political
peace, curiously called metapolitefsi, a Greek version of “historical compromise,” which convicted high members of the military junta, expelled the king, and founded the Third Hellenic Republic. Established by the liberal-democratic constitutional pact of 1975 and sealed in 1981 with the socialist accession to power, the demonstrations and riots challenged from below and outside of representative structures this thirty five years old civil consensus and political compromise, bringing it to a momentary standstill.

Because of this essential difference – the democratic factor – the December events might better compare with the various pre-dictatorial popular upheavals that shook Greek politics in the 1960s. But again, a telling difference appears. Noticeably, last year’s fighting was far more intense, violent, and destructive. Widespread riots broke out, the worst Greece has seen since the end of the civil war. More than 200 stores, banks, and public buildings were destroyed in the capital within the first two days, reaching up to 800 three days later, and on the whole hundreds of cars were torched. Shops and hotel lobbies were raided, and in a few cases evacuated, and hospitals, airports, and public transports were temporarily paralyzed. Physical destruction of that scope took everyone by surprise. The Athens Traders Association estimated that the first four days of rioting had caused €1 billion ($1.4 billion) in damages. A couple of months later, updated estimates spoke of €2 billion in private property damages alone. Clearly, by all accounts, the December protests were more militant, oppositional, and destructive than the better organized and disciplined pre-dictatorial struggles.

For its violence and intensity of political confrontation, then, the unrest recalls another eventful date in Greek political history: December 1944, when a demonstration and its repression ignited a thirty-seven day period of full-scale fighting in Athens between ELAS and the forces of the British army and the government. Evocatively, the current protests are also referred to as the “neo-Dekemvriana” in juxtaposition to the original “Dekemvriana.” But key distinctions cannot be ignored notwithstanding a shared anti-capitalist orientation. Among others, the uprising in ’44 had a much broader popular base, was more homogeneous, led by a communist political organization with a hierarchical organization and certain specific revolutionary aims of national liberation, and supported by a military wing that controlled means of physical violence. Most probably, that conflict reflected deeper and sharper divisions in the social body. Anyhow, the present actors neither succeeded in securing wider popular support nor did they coalesce into a revolutionary force with an explicit program of social, national, or political transformation. And although there is a serious concern that the ferocity of the confrontation has incubated a new urban guerilla force, the political violence in the civil war remains unparalleled when compared to the recent riots and their aftermath.

II.

Do all these singular “facts” qualify the December events as an insurrection, an uprising against the state? Are the attributes of the unrest, like velocity, duration, size, range, intensity, and composition, signs of a revolt against the instituted authority?

By most accounts they are. Many on the Right and the Left agreed on this. The mass media (domestic and international) promulgated a similar image that the public opinion identified with. Numerous intellectuals, journalists, pundits of all sorts, and representatives of the official civil society broadly shared this view, along with public officials and party delegates. Sympathetic movements and participants themselves identified the unrest as a rebellion and an uprising. Most concurred. It was an insurrection. There was civil disobedience and public unruliness, direct action outside institutional channels of expression, unmediated by
parties and formal rules, at the edges of and beyond legality, directed against the state and the civic order it represents. Symbols of state power and public authority were targeted. Hundreds of riot police were injured and, in addition to dozens of burned police cars, several stations were firebombed. \(^\text{11}\) Demonstrators attacked the police guarding the National Parliament and physically targeted the building with stones and Molotov cocktails. These assaults were followed by a series of rallies by students outside fifty police stations. Athens’ police headquarters were themselves besieged and attacked. As ministries, courthouses, government buildings, and party offices were assaulted, public electric utilities sabotaged, fire engines and ambulances assailed, the ominous term “Greek intifada” entered the nation’s political vocabulary. \(^\text{12}\) The presence of anarchist movements and Leftist extra-parliamentary tendencies throughout the protests provided enough of an elusive political identity to appear and to designate an enemy to combat, to be refuted. Lines were drawn and positions taken against and for the constituted ruling powers. Although the protesters, it is true, failed to hold space and to organize it politically, and abstained from articulating a unitary-popular demand or announcing an alternative positive political project, and did not create durable counter-powers and alternative institutions, their actions had a common determinate target. They were anti-statist. \(^\text{13}\) There was a refusal of the state in its totality, and not only of the government. With their direct actions and words, the demonstrators violated the law, turned against its guardians, attacked public goods, disrupted order, looted government property, resisted arrest, and, when arrested, charged under the anti-terror law. There were daily demonstrations and rallies; barricades and blocked roads; street fighting; bullets flying off from many sides; tear gas clouds; schools, universities, municipal offices, and theaters occupied; self-organized public assemblies; and the Christmas tree at Athens’s main Syntagma Square was set aflame, scorched by protesters, and became the symbol of the winter insurrection. And as labor unions called for general strikes, the offices of the country’s main labor union, the General Confederation of Greek Workers, were seized by a group of workers. Even the studios of the public TV broadcaster ERT were temporarily infiltrated by activists who aired a one-minute subversive message calling the audience to join them in the streets, interrupting a live news broadcast featuring the Prime Minister addressing the Greek Parliament during a heated debate with the opposition. \(^\text{14}\)

There were fears that an attempt was made to overthrow the government. The unrest was perceived as a direct, tangible threat to the security and existence of the constitutional order. The ruling elites displayed an existential fear while the country was taken by a general climate of political insecurity. On the institutional edifice, cracks of instability appeared after continued protests. The specter of an on-going insurrection, a revolt in the making, caused a generalized and, at times, hysterical anxiety. Will there be more deaths, more bloodshed? Is our property secured? Are our children safe? Is there order? Can the conservative government rule? Many spoke of a general distrust, an economic meltdown, a national pathology, a legitimacy crisis, a crisis of institutions and education, affecting not only the government but the very authority of the state as such. \(^\text{15}\) As the Prime Minister blamed “extremists” for the disorder and pledged to take “immediate” action, declaring that “The state has a duty to protect society and its citizens,” the leader of the socialist opposition called for early elections, on the grounds that the conservative government has proven incapable of defending the public from protesters and “anarchy.” \(^\text{16}\) An absence of order, a power vacuum, haunted Greek politics. The main conservative daily newspaper captured this bleak mood in its editorials, lamenting the lack of a strong leader to save the country from this pervasive crisis of chaos and ungovernability and pleading for someone to take the initiative to form an emergency coalition government and put an end to the unrest. \(^\text{17}\) Meanwhile, amidst all
this, Amnesty International accused the Greek police of brutality in handling the riots and its Greek Department canceled the scheduled celebrations in Athens for the 60th anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in response to the police violence.\\footnote{18}

It seems as if, at last, the “global state of emergency” was catching up with Greece.\\footnote{19} On the day of the cancelled UDHR celebration, rumors began to circulate that the government was seriously contemplating a state of emergency and was very likely declaring one.\\footnote{20} A crisis cabinet meeting was held during that night with the President, the Prime Minister, his closest collaborators and top ministers, and high-ranking police officials. Much remains unreported and thus clouded in state secrecy.\\footnote{21} But the purpose of the meeting was clear: to decide whether to suspend normal legal limitations and protections, to endow the government and its executive branch with more powers and discretion, to allow the police to enter universities, and to ban public demonstrations. In the early hours of Thursday morning, the nocturnal cabinet decided against the emergency strategy, probably as too risky, unpopular, and counterproductive. Later that day, the government rebuffed reports it was considering a state of emergency. A constitutional exception was averted, but not the political crisis.

III.

An insurrection occurred in Greece last December; a rebellion against state authority and its constitutional order by a part of its population. This uprising becomes all the more remarkable once we move beyond narrow and indulgent Greco-centric approaches to integrate the domestic with the transnational. After all, the insurrection echoed beyond the national borders and motivated equivalent acts, expressions of solidarity, from Sweden to Italy and France, to Bulgaria, Romania, and Spain, the UK, Denmark, Russia, Cyprus, Germany, Argentina and the United States. Even in the disputed state of Macedonia protesters gathered outside the Hellenic consulate in support of the Greek demonstrators, as they did in Turkey. All the while Subcomandante Marcos of the ELZN hailed their exemplarity and pledged the solidarity of the Zapatistas.\\footnote{22} Likewise, but from the opposite side, ruling elites in Europe worried the conditions are ripe for the insurrection to spread like a contagion as the continent plunged into recession. In France in particular, because of the living memory of the 2005 “émeutes de banlieues, President Nicolas Sarkozy could not totally conceal his concerns. “Look what is going on in Greece,” he remarked in the French Parliament, as he decided to postpone controversial education reforms after a week of student demonstrations that many feared could escalate into violence like that seen in Greece.\\footnote{23} “What we saw in Greece is not beyond what could happen here in France,” warned former socialist Prime Minister Laurent Fabius of the student protests that closed about a hundred French high schools. “When you have the economic depression and social despair we’re facing, all it takes is a spark.”\\footnote{24} Note here the irony of graffiti spray-painted onto an Athens building’s wall in French calling for “Spark in Athens. Fire in Paris. Insurrection is coming!”\\footnote{25} The wishes of some are the nightmares of others.

This transnational dimension of the insurrection has a deeper root. Greece not only is a relatively stable liberal constitutional democracy; it is, after all, a member of the European Union, which means that the conflict happened, at least in strict formal and juridical terms, on European soil, within the politically constituted space of the European Union. It is a European event as it is Greek. For this reason, it should be understood in the broader context of European politics, as one of its borderlands, its immigration policies, its Balkan wars, the
neo-liberal reforms and the financial crisis, the failure of the constitutional project and its democratic deficit, etc.

Here I recall Etienne Balibar’s prescient observation that “If Europe is for us first of all the name of an unresolved political problem, Greece is one of its centers, not because of the mythical origins of our civilization, symbolized by the Acropolis of Athens, but because of the current problems concentrated here.”26 In that sense, the Greek insurrection is a symptom of for Europe, “a local projection of forms of confrontation and conflict characteristic of all of Europe.”27

Why are the current “unresolved political problems” of Europe concentrated and catalyzed in Greece? And what are these “problems” and “conflicts”? Is the December 2008 insurrection one of these problems and why? To answer these questions, let me go back to the last of the “facts” of the unrest: its actual composition.28 Here, one touches on a unique aspect of the insurrection. Certainly, the actors were multiple: students of course, with the noteworthy addition of high school teens, the unemployed or semi-employed, low income employees, self-employed, workers, a remarkable number of women, anarchists, militants from the extra-parliamentary left, union members, activists from various social movements, squats, social centers, and autonomous networks and associations.29 Correspondingly, the insurrection has been variously treated as a teen rebellion, a youth and student uprising, the social revolt of the “€ 700/600 generations,” etc.30

It is at this point that I shift ground to draw attention to another actor, crucial, but much overlooked and misrepresented: the immigrant, the “foreign resident” of all juridical categories and classifications, the (lathro-) metanastis, the aldapos, etc.31 Let me emphasize that I do not underestimate the importance of other groups and participants, and especially of high school students. But like university students, they are not newcomers in the political scene. The mobilization and occupation of schools has a long tradition in the Greek youth movement that really peaks in the early 1990’s with a series of nationwide school occupations and mass demonstrations. Thus, I do not say that other participants were inconsequential. What is much less common in Greek politics, however, is the presence of immigrants, active and engaged, in the civic space. Compared with the barely existent immigrant activism in normal institutionalized politics and ordinary formal associations, the December insurrection speaks of something novel, a real rupture: a new subject appearing into the public realm, the rebellious immigrant, politicized and public, claiming a political life.32

Interpreting the insurrection from the lens of immigration brings into the surface and unifies a series of domestic political developments, transregional transformations, and global economic forces that set the conditions for the December events, all the while situating it within a broader European context. The foreign becomes the decisive factor, the central signifier for a fuller understanding of the unrests.

True, the conflict was not caused by a xenophobic or racist act but by the murder of a relatively wealthy Greek youth. Neither was it initiated by immigrants. No explicit demands were made in their name(s). The immigrants did not join the protests as a particular identity with fixed objectives, as bearers of their “ethnic,” “religious,” or “national” identities, but appeared on a common stage with others to take a position in the political sphere about a public wrong and for a generalizable interest that exceed their own individuality and finality; and to act-in-concert.35 Immigrant participation was articulated under the broader signifier of police brutality, to which both the foreign and the native can associate with. There is a universal concern, motivated by the violation of a general norm, by an infringement of human dignity that affects the whole and threatens the rights of all. From a very particular
social location with the spontaneity of the insurrection, the foreigner participant endorsed a civic interest and affirmed a political-general principle.

The first question to address, therefore, is the presence and scope of immigrant participation. Let’s look at some signs. Although available information based on empirical evidence is still inconclusive, there are a few suggestive indicators. First, for instance, is the number of arrests. Of the 273 arrests recorded from the start of the unrest up to mid-January 2009, approximately 130 were immigrants, that is, foreigners lacking Greek citizenship. About thirty of them were detained, a considerable number prosecuted, sentenced to eighteen months of imprisonment and with several deported or awaiting repatriation. A second sign for immigrant participation in the insurrection was the dynamic presence of civil associations, alternative networks, and social movements closely linked with immigrant populations through their struggle against racism and exclusion. These movements over the years have forged political relations, local alliances, shared spaces of action, mutual interests, and bonds of solidarity with the immigrants. Finally, there is the voice of the immigrants themselves, or, to be more accurate, the segments of the immigrant population who explicitly proclaimed their participation in the insurrection and provided public reasons for it. All these factors indicate that immigrant participation was substantial. The rebellious immigrant in action, in “active civic participation,” associated with others, politicized, and confrontational; this is the new element of the insurrection.

Of course, this new presence did not go fully unnoticed. Many international news agencies mentioned the participation of the immigrants in the unrest. Even mainstream Greek media acknowledged immigrant involvement. For sure, the immigrant was recognized but primarily as a negative figure to be denounced: as a looter, an outlaw, a threat to private property and public order. Foreigners were accused for the widespread riots and the worst violence was attributed to them. This anti-political category of the criminal came to overshadow and subsume the political significance of active immigrant participation. Once more, the figure of the immigrant was displaced. Not only was its political significance repressed, it became substituted by the familiar image of the thief and the lawbreaker. An important actor of the December events was thus criminalized, re-silenced, kept within the existing parameters of subordination, and in many cases ostracized. But negative distortions tend to carry a factual kernel of truth and in this case it is the irreducible presence of foreigners. As plunderers and burglars, outlaws and felons, misrecognized and distorted, the immigrants nonetheless kept a spot, a place within the insurrection. They were there: without citizenship, legally non-Greeks, sited outside the demos, politically excluded, and yet, acting, speaking, judging, deciding, occupying the public space, participating in the making of Greek politics.

Underneath all this, a large-scale ongoing demographic change is setting the stage on which the insurrection was played out. The post-Cold War Greek population is been radically altering. Its composition has increased and diversified in the last two decades. A decisive sign is the rate of increase of immigration, which since 1988 has been phenomenal, multiplying the number of immigrants fivefold. The lack of adequate and detailed data is, by all accounts, a major obstacle for the study of immigration. After two decades since the beginning of this historical wave of migration to Greece, no one knows with certainty the precise number of immigrants. Nonetheless, recent estimates raise their total number in the early years of the 21st century to between 9.7–10.2% of the population. That is, out of a total of around 11,200,000 inhabitants there are approximately one million foreign residents. Of those, 700,000–800,000 are considered “documented,” “registered,” or “legal” while approximately 200,000–300,000 remain “undocumented,” “unregistered,”
and “illegal.” The effects of this transformation are tectonic and cannot be addressed here. I consider the December insurrection to be in part such an effect. Social groups and segments of Greek society all contributing to its collective labor and submitted to the same political order of authority but excluded from it in numerous formal and informal ways, symbolically and materially, in the broader context of a generalized economic crisis and political stagnation became physically visible and, along with other others, publicly asserted their political presence.

Compared with a feeble immigrant activism in formal associations and institutionalized politics, the insurrection opened up new spaces of citizenship from below, performing a public norm, extending its use, making it more inclusive, and in fact radically transforming it. Whereas in the normal politics of the instituted society the immigrants are mostly private subjects, laborers, enjoying (when they do) formal private rights, confined to the civil and private spheres of social life and economic production, the insurgency staged their public appearance as active and engaged agents. They entered the civic space of the polis to become political actors.

As subjects with a stringent but unstable juridical status, lacking the political liberties of Greek citizens, rebellious immigrants, in defiance of the existing legal regime and its structures of hierarchy and exclusion, enacted politics and exercised a surplus of liberty to practice what they are not allow to. They became informal citizens, citizens de facto but not de jure, that is, citizens against the law. Illegally, or in Stathis Gourgouris’ prescient term, in “affirmative lawlessness,” in paranomia. Without a corresponding right, unwelcomed and uninvited, they broke into political space. Their political advent therefore was illicit, a violation of the constituted order. In fact, it represents a constitutional violation of a core normative principle, that of legal citizenship.

At the time of the insurrection, with regard to formal participation in the country’s political life, voting and standing for elections (local, national, and European) were fully restricted to Greek citizens. This exclusionary regime derives from the constitutional identification of the people (laos) with the nation (ethnos). More significantly, according to Part II of the Greek Constitution, immigrants who are legal residents did not have the right to assembly and rally (article 11) nor to enter into associations (article 12). Along with six other rights, they were exclusively reserved to Greek citizens. Although “legal” immigrants enjoy the remaining individual and social rights laid down by the constitution, they cannot become official party members or join professional unions. Thus, as participants in the insurrectional event, insurgent immigrants violated a constitutional right of privileged status and legal exclusion. They temporarily became citizens by way of a constitutional infringement. They breached the fundamental constitutional norm of citizenship and legal belonging in order to perform and thus acquire the very substance of that norm. They realized citizenship outside its national legal form.

By disobeying the law, a law that establishes their political exclusion, rebellious immigrants revived and expanded a Solonian idea of citizenship, predicated on agonistic commitment, taking sides on a public issue, and choosing one’s concrete position in the civic realm during a stasis. As Plutarch insightfully interpreted it, with this law Solon meant “that a man should not be indifferent to the common weal, arranging his private affairs securely and glorying in the fact that he has no share in the distempers and distresses of his country; but should rather espouse promptly the better and more righteous cause, share its perils and give it his aid, instead of waiting in safety to see which cause prevails.” The defining feature of citizenship is partisanship; civic participation is an act of choosing, making distinctions between friends and enemies, deciding one’s position on the political field, taking sides on a public issue of common concern. The Solonian law evokes a conception of citizenship suited
for conflict and antagonism, when the risks of civic engagement are significantly higher and the institution of the city becomes the object of disagreement. Political membership is not only a matter of prescribed juridical entitlements and formal privileges, of pure legality and abstract proceduralism, but also of informal concrete actions that contest the existing distribution of powers and the instituted structures of authority and representation in the name of a common interest. You are not a citizen only when the law authorizes you. One can become a citizen outside juridical categories and legal constructions without the corresponding formal political rights: a rightless citizen. Immigrant participation in the protests recalibrates democratic theory from the legal and formal existence of citizenship to its concrete enactment and actual performance – outside or against the law. It exposed the non-juridical dimension of a substantive, unmediated form of citizenship. The December insurrection briefly expanded the boundaries of the political, enlarged the practice of democratic action, and included those who are otherwise excluded from the common. It involved direct forms of civic participation that destabilized existing legal and symbolic perceptions of citizenship and challenged instituted forms of exclusion. By doing so, immigrant participation in the uprising has some far-reaching consequences on the constitutional organization of politics and the symbolic self-understanding of a democratic society.

IV.

That Greece is one of the centers of Europe that condensates the political problems and conflicts facing the continent, to return to Balibar’s insightful observation, is primarily due to the fact of its shifting geopolitical significance in the post-Cold War constellation. Thus, although Greece’s legal immigration regime is in no way representative of other European countries who have institutionalized certain forms of civic rights for immigrants and one could certainly say that it lags behind the European standards in integrating newcomers, Balibar’s approach highlights the spatial rather than the juridical centrality of Greece; its political geography instead of its legal system. If Greece has emerged as an important political site, it is because as the southern borderland outpost of the European fortress, it is one of the most vulnerable to population border crossings. It is easily exposed to international conflicts, economic crises, and political commotions outside its borders. In the case of European immigration, Greece constitutes a central point of entry. It is a political center as it is a front line of European politics. Its porous borders are not only spaces of mobility and movement, they have become zones of contention and conflict, of repression and resistance; they are politicized. Border crossing and population flows make Greece a “privileged” space for the emergence of new forms of conflicts and struggles around the political identity of Europe, the de-nationalization of democracy, the “democratization of borders,” and the radical expansion and symbolic transformation of citizenship.

With immigrant civic involvement in the insurrection, a new practice of citizenship was enacted blurring the juridical distinction between Greek and foreign, and thus de-linking political participation from ethnicity and nationality. The protests were less homogeneous, less ethnocentric, more hybrid and mixed than any other in the past, even cosmopolitan at moments, posing a challenge to the hegemonic ethnocentric concept of citizenship and the ultimate primacy of the national subject as the exclusive bearer of political rights. The insurrection opened up Greek politics to the problem of its exclusions. It “raises the question,” to use Riva Kastoryano’s terms, “of the link between participation and citizenship, nationality and identity, politics and culture within both the nation-state and in the European Union.” As such, the presence of the immigrant in the insurrection points in the direction of
de-nationalizing domestic politics while reinventing a new concept of democratic citizenship that overflows legal categories and formal rights to include practices and strategies of agonistic contestation that are constructed from below by the acting participants who directly and physically occupy the civic space, becoming citizens illegally and informally, stateless citizens, staging their appearance against state power and the prescriptions of national law. The politicization of immigrants raised the possibility of a democratic society detached from the primacy of ethnic identity and open to an active, rebellious, and agonistic exercise of citizenship that constantly puts into question and re-institutes its own boundaries: democracy as a “movement of transgressing limits.”

In fact, and this I take to be the most important aspect of the insurrection: 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. The December insurrection was a struggle, in Jacques Rancière’s terminology, between those who have no part in the administration of the common and those who control it. Those who have no right to be counted made themselves of some account, were taken into account. As Costas Douzinas notes, “antagonism resulted from the tension between the structured social body with its political representatives and groups, causes, and interests radically excluded from the political order.” By politicizing their exclusion and thus by bringing the outside to bear on the inside the protesters engaged in boundary re-drawing, toward a re-founding of the political community. Thus, the insurrection was part and parcel of a form of constituent politics whereby a society puts itself into question, seeking to institute itself anew.

It is true, as many commentators have pointed out, that the unrest and violence displayed an element of pure negativity, of angry refutation, a rejection of the established reality without a corresponding positive vision. The insurrection was merely reactive, against state power, failing to create something new, limited to a negative gesture of refusal and an affirmation of disorder for its own sake. What was missing was an organizational project to construct a political alternative. Thus, some spoke of a nihilistic event, a spontaneous explosion of rage and despair. They are right. But only partly. Notwithstanding its limitations, contradictions, and failings, viewed from the perspective of the insurgent immigrant, the 2008 Greek insurrection contains a positive constituent moment: the illegal and extra-institutional reconstitution and expansion of citizenship, membership, and community. It is a radicalization of democracy. And it could be the beginning of a drastic reconfiguration of Greek and therefore of European politics as well, the making of new political subjects, and the materialization of new transnational civic struggles over the democratic institution of the political with a broader reach.

In memory of Yorgos Koulakis

NOTES

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2. Attributed to Max Stirner by unknown sources and remains unidentified.


7. The question remains whether the continuous armed assaults, “selective” riots, and daily bank attacks, and other acts of public sabotage, underway since the beginning of the insurrection, have given rise to a “low intensity civil war,” analogous to what happened in Italy in the 1970s, in the “years of lead.”


9. According to a survey published in the Kathimerini daily, 60 percent of those polled said the riots were a social uprising and not the work of fringe groups. Also see “Greeks See 9-Day Protests As Popular Uprising – Poll,” Agence France-Presse, December 14, 2008 and Eleutherotypia, April 6, 2009, at http://archive.enet.gr/online/online_text/c=110,id=54350052

10. The Coming Insurrection, The Invisible Committee, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009; Also see, ANΗΣΥΧΙΑ: Μια καταγραφή του ανθρωπίτου τον Δεκέμβριο του 2008, επτάμι. Αλέξανδρος Κυριακόπουλος και Ευθύμιος Γουργουρός, Αθήνα: Εκδόσεις Καστανώτης, 2009; and the special issue on the Greek riots, “#giroits,” Σύγχρονα Θέματα, 103 (2008), pp. 5–33.

11. According to official estimates released by the government, overall, across the country, 231 police personnel were injured, 143 police cars were burned, and 184 police stations assaulted or destroyed.

12. The government has mentioned the destruction of 63 government buildings and 14 courthouses.

13. Douzinas, “What we can learn from the Greek riots.”

14. For this event, see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V4dFeKvzNwE.

15. For an analysis that focuses primarily on legitimation crisis, see Bratsis, “Legitimation Crisis and the Greek Explosion.”

16. See, “PASOK leader Papandreou calls for new govt’ mandate,” ANA-MPS S.A., http://www.ana-mpa.gr/anaweb/user/showplain?maindoc=7127112&maindocimg=7119232&service=8. As I complete this paper, the Socialist Party has won the early national elections proclaimed on October 4, 2009 and have formed a new government. Tellingly, one of its first announcements was to fight against “anomie” and the militant Leftist extra-parliamentary movements, recognized as the cause of this “anomie.”


21. Even the exact date of the emergency meeting is uncertain, hidden in state arcane. The media have reported various estimates, ranging from December 8 to December 10.

Revolted Greece.
We, the smallest, from this corner of world, salute you.
Accept our respect and our admiration
for what you think and do.
From far away, we learn from you. We thank you.”
Subcomandante Marcos, 1st World Festival of Dignified Rage, January 2, 2009.


25. Another graffiti written in Greek read “France, Greece, uprising everywhere.”


32. For the broader concept of “insurgent citizenship,” see Engin F. Isin’s groundbreaking work, *Being Political: Genealogies of Citizenship* ( Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

33. For an insightful elaboration of the staging of the political, see Jason Frank, “Staging Dissensus: Frederick Douglas and ‘We, the People,’” *Law and Agonistic Politics*, ed. Andrew Schaap (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2009), 87–104.

34. For instance, of the 134 arrests, 85 were young, up to twenty-five years old, which suggests that the great majority of the arrested were probably second generation immigrants. Additionally, it would be useful to possess a political map of the schools that actively participated in the unrests to see their concrete geographical, economic, and cultural locations and dispersions. How many schools were situated in zones increasingly populated by immigrants with the foreign students among their midst? There is a broader phenomenon here. If we go back to our inefficient statistics, there has been a rapid increase in total foreign student numbers from 44,000 in primary and secondary education in 1996 to 119,000 in 2003. Over the past five years, the total population in primary schools has fallen by 5%, while at the same time the number of foreign pupils has risen by 400%. Foreign schoolchildren, including second-generation immigrants, constitute some 13% of the total schoolchildren. What is interesting and demands serious inquiry is how the variables of youth and migration intersect and overlap in this case. Martin Baldwin-Edwards, Giannis Kyriakou, Panagiota Kakalika, and Giannis Katsios, *Statistical Data on Immigrants in Greece: An Analytic Study of Available Data and Recommendations for Conformity with the European Union Standards* (Athens: Imepo and Mediterranean Migration Observatory, 2004), 18–20; Martin Baldwin-Edwards, “Immigration into Greece 1990–2003. A Southern European Paradigm?” Paper presented at the European Population Forum, Geneva, January 2004, 11.


36. See for instance, the public announcement or political communiqué of the “Albanian Migrants’ Steki,” posted by on the web on December 19, 2008 at: http://clandestinenglish.wordpress.com/2008/12/19/our-share-of-these-days.


38. The most excessive violence, such as looting and burning, was attributed to foreigners and pitted against “our children,” the disobedient teens of Greek descent who, whatever they do, do not loot or sack.

39. This claim does not entail a kind of demographic determinism, according to which large-scale population changes lead inexorably to political realignments. However, a renewed materialism remains attentive to demographic trends if only to engage with the underlying geopolitical context, economic forces, state policies, and legal systems that are involved in the formation and development of these trends. This is what I call a demographic materialism.

40. Since the start of the 20th century Greece has been a country exporting immigration with periods of rapid and substantial decrease of the Greek population (around 12% of the Greek population emigrated from 1881–1951). But in the late 1980’s, Greece turned into an importing country – due partly to the restrictive immigration policies adopted by other Western developed countries but mainly to the collapse of the Eastern communist bloc. Thus, Greece is currently characterized by a pattern of “reverse migration.” For a general view, see Charalambos Kasimis and Chryssa Kassimi, *Greece: A History of Migration* (Migration Information, 2004); R. Fakiolas and R. King “Emigration, Return, Immigration: A Review and Evaluation of Greece’s Experience of International Migration,” *International Journal of Population Geography* 2 (1996): 171–190.


42. I will venture to say that this demographic increase in the last twenty years can only be compared with another sudden demographic growth in the 1920’s, but then it was sustained and assisted by a corresponding territorial increase and a unitary national identity that could accommodate and absorb the newcomers. Interesting enough, this assimilation led also to substantial political conflicts and changes that transformed the political map of Greece.


44. Gropas and Triandafyllidou, “Active Civic Participation of Immigrants in Greece,” 23–27.


47. The following analysis was written before the recent immigration reforms that the new government passed on the 10th of March. Certainly, this controversial reform alters certain political parameters, although its enactment is deeply rooted on that turbulent December.


51. Tellingly, Solon also granted the right of citizenship to immigrant craftsmen, in particular to potters, many of whom left Corinth at about that time and took up residence in Athens. For two different but related discussions of agonistic citizenship, see Jason Frank, “Staging Dissensus: Frederick Douglas and ‘We, the People,’” and David Owen, “The Expressive Agon: On a Political Agency in a Constitutional Democratic Polity,” *Law and Agonistic Politics*, 71–86.


54. The concept of the rightless citizen cannot be adequately addressed in the confines of this paper. It is puzzling as it is suggestive and demands its own systematic treatment elsewhere. For now, suffice it to say that a Solomian theory of citizenship would need to integrate the illegal/illicit dimension of civic engagement and political antagonism, the conflictual realization of a norm outside the norm.


65. Douzinas, “What we can learn from the Greek riots.”


68. Douzinas, “What we can learn from the Greek riots.”

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69. Stathis Gourgouris, “What is the Politics of Rage?” Paper presented at the Left Forum Conference, in a panel on “Making Sense of the Greek Uprising,” April 18, 2009. There is even an armed group that has emerged with the name, “Nihilist Fraction.” It has primarily targeted churches and religious symbols and establishments.

70. For a discussion of constituent power and democracy in terms of the politics of the extraordinary, see Andreas Kalyvas, Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary: Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, and Hannah Arendt, Cambridge University Press, 2008.

