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## Spatial legacies of December and the right to the city

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REVOLT AND CRISIS IN GREECE

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BETWEEN A PRESENT YET TO PASS AND A FUTURE STILL TO COME

Edited by

*Antonis Vradis and Dimitris Dalakoglou*

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## SPATIAL LEGACIES OF DECEMBER AND THE RIGHT TO THE CITY 1

*Antonis Vradis & Dimitris Dalakoglou*

What grounds gave birth to December's revolt and most importantly, what new grounds has the revolt given birth to in return? The political background of the events of those days and their repercussions are discussed extensively in the next part of this book.<sup>2</sup> What we have tried to do here is to take a look at the *actual, physical* grounds of the uprising and its legacies—to read it, that is, through its inscription in the urban space of the city of Athens. To look at urban struggles in new sites of confrontation that have opened up there since; everyday reminders that *December lives*.

But why is the site of the uprising important and why should we concern ourselves with its spatial legacies? It is easy enough to answer this question—after all, the spontaneous gathering of thousands at the scene of the police killing in the neighbourhood and the reverberation of the protests across Greece and around the globe were driven by two main factors. First, the near-instant spread of the news of the police killing was made possible by grassroots media and particularly by independent media websites;<sup>3</sup> only hours after the assassination, impromptu demonstrations began taking place in dozens of cities inside and outside of Greece. Second, though, and perhaps most importantly, there was the political symbolism associated with the location of the murder of Alexis Grigoropoulos. Exarcheia is adjacent to the Athens Polytechnic, the epicentre of the anti-dictatorial student uprising of 1973 and

the place where acts of political dissent and unrest in the country's post-dictatorial era (1974–present) have been centred since. The site of the ignition of the revolt was equally important to the breathtaking speed with which it spread.

The December uprising quickly became the focal point for an emerging radical movement. At the same time, it also became a reference point for both state authorities and reactionary non-state actors. Both have reconfigured their strategies in the process of confronting an empowered and confident radical social movement in the country. Beginning in the immediate post-revolt period (from early 2009 onward) the two sides in December's conflict have produced new relationships to public space as expressions of their own political identities and strategies. These new urban spatial practices are the main subject of our chapter. More precisely we consider the socio-spatial dynamics of two urban sites that emerged in Athens in the aftermath of the 2008 uprising: one, the self-organised Navarinou Park, born in March 2009 in Exarcheia; and two, the Ayios Panteleimonas Square, only a few kilometres away. Members of the neo-Nazi group Chrysi Avgi (Golden Dawn) have been attempting to establish since May 2009 a "migrant-free" zone in explicit cooperation with the police force permanently stationed in the area.

The conflicts at these small urban sites can only be seen as deriving from and at the same time reflecting wider social dynamics. We offer some thoughts on these two examples in the context of what has become an important current within social struggles in the metropolises of the West, including segments of the "social antagonist movement," within which we place ourselves. We are talking about struggles for "the right to the city" (RtC): by placing our two examples alongside both contemporary debates about the RtC and the original conception by Henri Lefebvre we suggest that these place-specific struggles can help us rethink the "right to the city" altogether.

#### A SANDBOX OF FREEDOM

On the morning of 7 March 2009, a mass of people armed with shovels and plants marched through the central Athens district of Exarcheia. They were heading for an abandoned parking lot just a few yards from where Alexandros Grigoropoulos was murdered. Breaking the asphalt surface of the lot, they quickly replaced it with plants. In the digging and planting that followed, the first self-organised park of central Athens was born thanks to the combined efforts of experienced activists,

new activists politicized during the events of December, and “ordinary” local residents. But these are no ordinary times and this is most certainly not an ordinary neighbourhood: Exarcheia has a long radical tradition, partly due to the presence of the Athens Polytechnic and some premises of the University of Athens in its vicinity. Relatively cheap housing has historically allowed students, intellectuals, radical political groups, bookshops, and affordable eateries to thrive in the area. As the centre of the city’s intellectual and political activity, the neighbourhood has long been a hotbed of radical action too. For the greater part of the country’s post-dictatorial era both media and popular discourses have characterized Exarcheia as the heart of anarchist activity in Athens. In the coverage of the events of December 2008 alone, Exarcheia was portrayed as anything from a “volatile district”<sup>4</sup> and an area that “anarchists regard as their fortress,”<sup>5</sup> to “Athens’s answer to Harlem”<sup>6</sup> and even a “ghetto.”<sup>7</sup>

Yet for all the area’s history and potential, it was not until after December 2008 that the Exarcheiots would dare attempt such a bold appropriation of public space, transforming it into a meeting point for the people of the neighbourhood—green and public space of a kind notoriously lacking in Greek cities. The park’s organising assembly (a loose but regular gathering of people interested in running the space) explicitly traces its origin to December’s uprising. People in the area often call the park “December’s park,” not only because it is close to the point where Grigoropoulos was assassinated, but also because the park would not have been born without the collective empowerment and confidence gained for radical activities in the aftermath of the revolt. Since March 2009, this experiment in freedom has seen a wide variety of local residents, individuals, and various radical political groups (many of whom played a key role in the December events) come together, overcome long-standing sectarian divisions, and use the new space for concerts, film screenings, meetings and info-nights, exhibitions and festivals. The open-air space has provided unprecedented visibility for many political groups: for example, the curious onlooker can stop and take a peek at the regular public screenings organised by the Haunt of Albanian Migrants, whose declaration of participation in the uprising was exemplary of December’s spirit.<sup>8</sup> Besides such public events, people continue to gather almost weekly in order to carry out the work necessary for the maintenance of the park, which has also received positive coverage in some mainstream media.<sup>9</sup>

One year after the uprising, the “Self-Organised Navarinou 79 Park” hosted a three-day event about the revolt. Similarly, several other

December-related protests, like the demonstrations in solidarity with the hunger-striker Iliopoulos (arrested in December 2008) started or ended there. This little park has become a new base of struggle for post-December grassroots political activities in Exarcheia and beyond. It is not surprising, then, that it has itself become an object of struggle: in the eyes of the authorities the park is an emblematic child of December, which continues to inspire various anti-authoritarian activities and must therefore be suppressed. In the first twelve months of its existence alone, the park had already claimed at least three major police raids (under both the conservative Nea Dimokratia government and, since their ascent to power in October 2009, the social democrats of PASOK). During these raids, police in full riot gear stormed the park and arrested and beat those who happened to be there at the time. Merely being present in the park has become a political act—and a punishable one at that.

#### WHEN THE NAZIS CAME TO THE SQUARE

This direct and violent suppression of the Navarinou Park coincided with the emergence of another space operating on completely anti-theoretical principles. In May 2009, a mere two kilometres away in the neighbourhood of Ayios Panteleimonas, members of the neo-Nazi group Golden Dawn—along with right-wing populist partners—started visibly organising.<sup>10</sup> The area, which together with Exarcheia stands among the most centrally located residential zones of Athens, had seen a recent influx of migrants—many of Afghan origin. Most ended up there after having been pushed out of the more tourist-oriented central areas of the city by police “cleansing” operations in the lead-up to the 2004 Olympics. Anything deemed “dirty” by authorities, from stray dogs to undocumented or homeless migrants, street vendors, and drug users, was to be eliminated from public view.

Four years after the Olympic spectacle, neo-Nazis hijacked the area’s so-called “local resident committee,” an organisation that had been founded sometime earlier by residents of various political backgrounds. But this political diversity was soon pushed out as neo-Nazis—many living in other areas of the city—took control as of November 2008. It was at that time that they organised their first protests against what they claimed was the supposed occupation of their neighbourhood by clandestine migrants. Gathering at the Ayios Panteleimonas Square, the neo-Nazis argued that migrants without papers, the recent

80 riots, self-organised parks, and all such things disorderly had to be confronted directly by so-called ordinary citizens. Members of Golden

Dawn envision a system of authoritarian rule that would make urban areas “ethnically and politically clean” through mass deportations of migrants and other means. Their aim was to rid the area of “undesirables,” particularly the migrants who had found refuge there after the Olympic pogroms of 2004. What the Nazis lacked in numbers they quickly made up in support from authorities. Police-backed Nazi patrols ensured that the square’s playground was locked up in order to prevent migrants’ children from using it. A local church—located by the square itself—was forced to stop providing free meals to local migrants out of fear after direct neo-Nazi threats against the church’s head priest.

On 26 May 2009, “persons unknown” set fire to the church’s basement, where the priest had been offering shelter to homeless migrants. Weeks later, a parent who tried to break the siege of the playground along with his five-year-old son was physically attacked by neo-Nazis; police arrested the parent for “provocative behaviour” and detained him for hours in the local police department, which was besieged by a mob of a few dozen members of the “Ayios Panteleimonas Resident Committee” who threatened to lynch him. Throughout the summer of 2009 a number of anti-fascist demonstrations entered the square and temporarily opened up the playground only to be tear-gassed and pushed back by police units. In July 2009, the then-Vice Minister of Public Order Christos Markoyannakis visited the square and met with the neo-Nazi-led resident committee—never hiding his sympathy for their extreme right-wing politics. Only minutes after the meeting ended, a small group of neo-Nazis left the square and headed for the nearby Villa Amalias squat only to be outnumbered and chased away by those defending one of Athens’s oldest squatted buildings.

At the time of this writing (late 2010), the square is still effectively under neo-Nazi control. The playground is locked up, the “Ayios Panteleimonas Resident Committee” still organises its own anti-migrant patrols, and riot police units are still permanently stationed by the square to provide assistance in preserving their authoritarian rule. Throughout the past year, stories have surfaced in mainstream media about ruthless attacks on migrants in the neighbourhood. In late August 2009, a local Afghan shopkeeper was forced to close his café early in the evening “so that migrants would not mingle around it.” The police have refused to take testimonies from migrants who have been assaulted.<sup>11</sup> The soothing words of the then-social-democratic Minister of Citizen Protection<sup>12</sup> (who called the situation around Ayios Panteleimonas Square “scary” in October 2009) have not been accom-  
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panied by any concrete changes on the ground.

Contrary to the relatively unchanged situation in Ayios Panteleimonas, the Exarcheia neighbourhood quickly felt in its bone the rise of the social-democratic PASOK government in October 2009. From the government's second day in power, the area was besieged by police. The new government's intention became evident not only in the repeated raids on the Navarinou Park but also—and especially—in the daily siege of the entire neighbourhood in those days: restrictions on the free flow of people in and out, constant ID checks of passersby, random detentions, forced detouring of people, etc. Yet the most important aspect of the Exarcheia operations after PASOK's rise to power has been played out at the level of representation. One only has to take a glimpse at mass media coverage of these operations to realise that the new government sought to simultaneously occupy the physical and representational space of the neighbourhood.

Bolstered by these media distortions, the new government took things as far as claiming that Exarcheia was *en route* to becoming a “Greek Montmartre”<sup>13</sup> (as then Deputy Minister of Citizen Protection Spyros Vougias had put it). Its interventions in Exarcheia were intended to demonstrate a capacity to enforce order and a containment of the riotous spirit of December 2008. This representational project has been aimed at two target audiences: one, a conservative segment that was to appreciate the state's show of force in the physical presence of police on the streets of this famously unruly neighbourhood; and two, the anarchist and leftist activists who, according to media representations, concentrate themselves exclusively in Exarcheia. The idea, it seems, has been to reassure the conservative parts of society by intimidating those who would dare to continue to resist after December.

#### THE RIGHT TO THE CITY

State repression aside, what is it that remains of an urban uprising after the dust settles? What can the cases of Navarinou Park and the square of Ayios Panteleimonas tell us about the articulation of an uprising's legacy through the new and more permanent sites of political confrontation it produces? And how do the emergent spatial practices in post-revolt Athens fit into the broader legacy of uprisings and riots in European and American cities more generally?

These questions must be approached in the context of a more generic one—namely: what is the potential of violent crowds to become agents of change and what might spatial practices linked with this potential social change look like today? This is a question that has been re-

peatedly posed by historians, from Eric Hobsbawm's (1965) descriptions of the "pre-political" urban mobs of medieval cities to E.P. Thompson's analysis of the "moral economy" of crowds in 18th century. A major turning point in the "revolutionary" potential of such crowd action occurred between the French Revolution of 1789 and the Paris Commune of 1871. And yet, at the dawn of the era of bourgeois democracy and industrial production, violent crowd action found itself out-manoeuvred by urban design (e.g. the so-called "Hausmannization" of Paris as the prototype for social control through urban planning),<sup>14</sup> outdated by changes in social stratification, with the crowd's spontaneity being "incompatible with the long-lasting solidarities" (Hobsbawm 1965: 124) of the then-emergent working class. It found itself outmoded by the supposed evolution of political representation since bourgeois democracy was widely considered to be "both an improved substitute for violence and altogether incompatible with any form of violence" (Moore 1968: 1). For all these reasons you could have expected city mobs, violent crowds, and urban riots to have all but vanished: it was for these reasons, in fact, that Hobsbawm had announced their "passing." (1965: 124).

But in the last decades of the 20th century this idyllic image of First World urban politics has been "shattered by spectacular outbursts of public unrest, rising ethnic tensions, and mounting destitution and distress at the heart of large cities" (Wacquant 2008: 18). The examples are many: acts of urban rioting have taken place in numerous metropolises including Paris (1968); Brixton, London (1981); Los Angeles (1992); Bradford, Leeds, and Oldham in the north of England (2001); and more recently Paris (2005) and, of course, Athens (2008). Academic efforts to grapple with this most recent upsurge of urban rioting have focused on the structural causes underlying each instance. These range, for example, from the perceived social policy failures that led to the French suburban uprisings of 2005, (see for example Dikeç 2007), to the interracial tensions that erupted into a string of urban riots in the north of England in 2001 (See Amin 2003 and Bagguley and Hussain 2008) and the long-standing animosity between police and members of the black community that served as backdrop to the outpouring of violence in Los Angeles in 1992 (see Baldassare 2004 and Jacobs 2000). The dominant approach has been to read acts of rioting primarily as responses to particular structural injustices and to focus on operations aimed at preventing their re-emergence. But there are reasons to think that another perspective, more attuned to spatial dynamics, might provide important insights about the legacies of urban riots and revolts.

Consider Manuel Castells's reading of the string of urban riots in the US of the 1960s as a form of urban social movement, with participants claiming the right to occupy and re-use certain urban spaces (the black ghettos) for their own purposes as a key "organizational basis of the revolt" (Castells 1983: 53). Individuals and collectivities participating in urban riots for this purpose might then be understood to be making a claim to a "right to the city" which, in Lefebvre's original conception, was a call for "a radical restructuring of social, political, and economic relations, both in the city and beyond" (Lefebvre 1996: 34). This original conception of the right involved the capacity to access urban services, but also considered a "right to appropriation"—that is, inhabitants' right "to physically access, occupy, and use urban space" (Purcell 2002: 103).

It is in this conception of the "right to the city" that a fundamental political and material-spatial difference between Navarinou Park and Ayios Panteleimonas Square can be seen. First of all, the Nazis who physically occupied the square lacked the explicit legacy of revolt that animated the occupation of Navarinou Park. The Nazis were simply reacting to the December event and its legacies, creating a field of artificial social tension in an effort to manifest their limited spatial and political presence in a city that was briefly overcome by anti-authoritarian revolt. However, and more importantly, the people of Navarinou Park had the power and the will to access, occupy, and radically alter the actual materiality of the former parking lot: they tore apart the asphalt, planted trees, painted the walls, transformed building walls into cinema screens, and threw away metal and plastic fences. In short, the people involved in Navarinou Park turned the site into a lived space, organically integrated into the life of Exarcheia while at the same time reflecting and affecting political developments in the country. On the other hand, by preventing migrants and anti-Nazi inhabitants from being in the square and using the playground, the Nazis in Ayios Panteleimonas altered none of the established materialities of the square's space. This was because they lacked the social legitimacy and power that the revolt offered to the Navarinou Park people and because, together with government forces, they concentrated exclusively on the politics of representation and symbolism rather than on the politics of lived urban space. The most that the authoritarian occupiers of Ayios Panteleimonas can stand for is the fragmented and local right of Greeks to use the square as opposed to foreigners, establishing a regime of fear and violent discrimination: a single-issue politics materialised with a

84 very passive and limited spatial practice—that is, closure and fencing of the site where they want to root their explicit political project.

In contrast, the Navarinou Park project has reached beyond the representations of what can be achieved without the intervention of the state and when people self-organise. It is a spatial-material legacy of the revolt but it is now also a lived everyday space with a constant flow of people and events. Integrated within a broader framework of post-revolt political potential in Greece, it is open both socially and spatially to the transformations in Athens after the uprising. This becomes clear in light of the most recent police raid on the park that took place in April 2010, only days before the loan agreement between the Greek government and the International Monetary Fund, the European Central Bank, and the European Union.<sup>15</sup>

In December 2008, popular consent for the post-dictatorial political settlement broke down rapidly and spectacularly, bringing a simmering political crisis to boil; at its core was a rapidly fading faith in the political legitimacy of the Greek state and its apparatuses. Since the December revolt the Greek state has been confronted with some very tangible ruptures. Several segments of the population have emerged from December more confident about the potential of their own political identities and projects, which have a strong anti-state and anti-authoritarian character. Many of these post-December political subjects were brought together through the Navarinou Park occupation. While this site may be a relatively minor instance of urban reclamation, it nevertheless represents a significant resistance-scape<sup>16</sup> that poses a tangible danger for the Greek authorities and their political crisis (now presented as a fiscal one) because of its potential to evolve into a much broader escalation by some of the most progressive and militant elements of society.

Governance in the post-dictatorial period has alternated between the two main political parties, which have bred nepotism, large-scale corruption, and enabled the domination of the political landscape by a small number of families. The shifting of attention to narrow financial-administrative issues in the current moment can be read as an attempt by political elites to distract attention from this long-standing political crisis that was expressed so dramatically in the December revolt. Since October 2009, when PASOK came to power, an attempt has been made to create a war-like atmosphere of financial emergency. The state has exploited this sense of crisis to characterize protests, strikes, occupations, and similar actions as being not only opposed to the government and financial elites, but also to some imaginary common (“national”) good.

On the night of April 12, 2010—one day after arranging the 85 details of a major loan from the IMF, the ECB, and the EU (the so-

called *Troika*, see Glossary)—Greek authorities sent hundreds of police special forces to raid the Navarinou Park where they beat up and detained more than seventy people. Because of its potential as a base from which the new policies and measures related to the Government-Troika deal could be opposed, the very first target the Greek state chose was the park. What defines the park is that it openly questions the consent that Greek authorities—along with the Troika—request from large segments of the society to work more, to be paid less and to come under increased surveillance. The park shows the possibilities of spatialising resistance and the potential of a radical conception of the “right to the city.”

While many urban political groups from the left have invoked a version of this right to the city, the term has too often been mobilized in precisely the ways that Lefebvre would have warned against—that is, in the terms of single-issue politics. Even worse, the “right to the city” has at times signalled a narrowing of political forms from the global and national to the regional (specifically, the urban) arena—or even as an imagined exit from the milieu of politics altogether. In this sense Mark Purcell is quite right to point out that the right to the city has often been misinterpreted to describe groups applying “fragmented, tactical, or piecemeal resistance” (Purcell 2002: 101). Citizen groups looking to create more green spaces in their neighbourhood, for example, could do so in the name of a common good and as an act that is apparently not political, since it does not seem to produce any immediate political confrontation. Surely everyone is in favour of planting a tree!

Indeed, there are good examples today in which to see both the pitfalls and the potential of claims to the right to the city. For example, Critical Mass bike rides are seen by some of their participants as little more than a means to carve out space for bicycles to share the road with other vehicles: the right for yet another transport vehicle (the bicycle) to exist side-by-side with the emblematic vehicle of capitalist culture, the car. But this reading misses how these mass demonstrations can function as a challenge to the culture of capitalism. Within a broader political framework, the Critical Mass ride might serve as a key challenge to the legitimacy of an icon of capitalist culture: the socially isolating and environmentally destructive car and its capacity to provide the capitalist system with constant and speedy flows of people and commodities. Critical Mass rides—by the sheer volume of their participants, their slowed-down pace, and their attack on the individuality imposed by car transportation—challenge inherent and fundamental elements of

As we saw in the example of Navarinou Park the “right to the city” is not about rights, and it is not about cities; at least, it is not exclusively about either. If fragmented and narrowly understood “rights” were this concept’s only criteria, then the Nazis’ claim for the exclusive right of Greek citizens to access and use of the square and the playground might also qualify. The Navarinou Park version of the right to the city is much closer to more radical conceptions of a “collective human right” that have, according to David Harvey, emerged throughout history as responses to the fact that most notions of human rights “do not fundamentally challenge hegemonic liberal and neoliberal market logics, or the dominant modes of legality and state action” (Harvey 2008).

What has been happening in Athens since December 2008, then, is an attempt by some of the participants in the December uprising to make their own claim to the city, and through this process to subvert the authority of the state over everyday life and to experience an unmediated and unobstructed fulfilment of their needs and desires. This is no small order and, for this reason, the authorities’ crackdown on these spaces should come as no surprise. After all, it is there, outside the margins set by authority, that the legacy of the 2008 revolt can be fought for and where it can be materialized on an everyday level.

## NOTES

1 An earlier version of this chapter appeared in Upping the Anti 10.

2 See Part 2. The Event: December.

3 For an extensive discussion of the role of independent in media see the article by Metropolitan Sirens in this volume.

4 “Years of riots, clashes with police in Greece,” <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUKTRE4B61DW20081208>.

5 “Greek police shooting sparks riot,” <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7769710.stm>.

6 Helena Smith “In Athens, middle-class rioters are buying rocks. This chaos isn’t over,” <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/dec/14/greece-riots-youth-poverty-comment>.

7 “Children of the Revolution,” <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/feb/22/civil-unrest-athens>.

8 Haunt of Albanian Migrants, “These Days Are Ours, Too,” n.d. Available at <http://www.occupiedlondon.org/blog/2008/12/15/these-days-are-ours-too/>

9 Articles that report on the opening of the park appeared by and large in the mainstream press, e.g. <http://www.lifo.gr/mag/features/1280> while some publications have also covered the state of repression the park quickly encountered, e.g. “Athens Voice,” <http://www.athensvoice.gr/the-paper/article/284/>.

10 The term neo-Nazi is used relatively loosely here. Those involved in Ayios Panteleimonas include both neo-Nazi skinheads and more mainstream extreme right-wing nationalists. Golden Dawn is a small neo-Nazi organisation that openly participates in elections as a national-socialist party. Its agenda, aesthetics, and violent practices and discourses follow the international trend of Nazism. Along with the skinheads of Golden Dawn, there are various other extreme-right wing populist politicians in Greece with their own groups, press, and followers. These organisations trace their political origin to the Greek junta (1967–1974) and its para-state apparatuses. Several of these extreme right-wing populists hold positions in the full spectrum of right-wing parties. The most distinct extreme right-wing parliamentary party is the “Popular Orthodox Alert” (L.A.O.S). However Nea Dimokratia (which governed the country between 2004 and 2009) includes several extreme right-wing populist politicians. These “patriotic forces” often ally with one another to promote common issues.

11 “Two new attacks on migrants,” Ioanna Sotirchou in the *Eleftherotypia*, 26 August 2009b [in Greek] <http://www.enet.gr/?i=news.el.article&id=76200>.

12 The social-democratic PASOK government was quick to rename the “Ministry of Public Order” the “Ministry of Citizen Protection”—with the ministry’s roles intact, including the command of the country’s police and Coastguard forces.

13 The vice-minister was referring to the Montmartre district of Paris, which used to be a bohemian part of the French capital. Since the end of World War II it has been gentrified and is today one of the most popular tourist destinations in the city.

14 Baron Haussmann’s radical renovation of Paris (1852–1870) involved, for example, the replacement of the city’s medieval alleys with wide boulevards that cut through traditional working-class neighbourhoods while providing security forces swift access to the city—invaluable in the case of social unrest.

15 Only days before the final corrections and submission of this article, the first draft of which was initially written in spring 2009.

16 “Resistance-scape” refers to sites that overcome the ephemeral nature dominating several of the RtC-related activities. Resistance-scapes are being developed within the framework of the RtC activities, but they are becoming materially and spatially durable and form explicit resistance discourses and practices.