

BLOGGING THE GREEK RIOTS: BETWEEN AFTERMATH AND ONGOING ENGAGEMENT

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“Blogs have changed the world in various ways; the point, however, is to interpret them.

- Geert Lovink, *Zero Comments: Blogging and Critical Internet Culture*, 2008: 1.

If something scares us [it] is the return to normality. For in the destroyed and pillaged streets of our cities of light we see not only the obvious results of our rage, but the possibility of starting to live. We have no longer anything to do than to install ourselves in this possibility transforming it into a living experience: by grounding on the field of everyday life, our creativity, our power to materialise our desires, our power not to contemplate but to construct the real. This is our vital space. All the rest is death.

- communiqué of the Athens School of Economics and Business occupation, 11/12/2008.

This paper concerns the online representation and discussion of ongoing aspects and implications of the recent uprising in Greece, sparked by the December 6th police shooting of 15-year-old Alexis Grigoropoulos in Athens. Tens of thousands of people joined protests, clashes with police, property destruction, and occupations which paralyzed major cities there for weeks, and anarchists played a significant role (both on the ground and in mainstream depictions of a masked and hooded ‘folk devil’). The uprising drew comparison to the events of 1968, and speculation that the unrest might spread across Europe. The online presence of anarchists was prominent, and even after the initial protests receded, some bloggers and others continued to discuss the rebellion, and the wider relevance of Greek struggles, online.

I have sought to produce a ‘cyberspace ethnography’ of my online locus of investigation, delimited by available online content concerning the Greek situation from an anarchist (or sympathetic) perspective – and focused on a few blogs which remained active following the decline of popular participation in on-the-ground disruptions and protest. My main foci concern online attempts to resist the foreclosure of the Greek uprising as an isolated ‘event’ (with a putative ending in the symbolic restoration of ‘order’ on the streets), the possible indications and bases of ‘collective identity’ in this context, and the ways in which some blogs and forums make links (conceptual and hyper-) to other contexts, local and international, in their treatments of the Greek situation – thus focusing the (anarchist) activist imaginary beyond the limited context of the initial action. In responding to these questions, I discuss virtual spaces as a site of opposition to mainstream accounts, trace some of the connections drawn with diverse struggles, international (and translocal) contexts, and consider elements of a possible anarchist ‘collective identity’ (through the work of Melucci

and Uri Gordon), drawing out tensions and debates. Finally, I seek to emphasize the practice of translating and reproducing ‘poetic’ texts, which I relate to Lewis Call’s notion of ‘postmodern anarchism’ and Rob Shields’ work on the ‘virtual’ (by way of Debord and Baudrillard) in thinking about the (anarchist) activist imaginary and resistance to mainstream accounts of resistance and rebellion.

Locus, method & ethical considerations

In terms of locus and method, I employ a participant-observation approach to explore online pathways, locations, and content linked hypertextually and by common concern with an English-language ‘anarchist’ perspective on the Greek riots and occupations. I look primarily at a small number of blogs which continued to devote sustained coverage after the December 24th ‘break’ in street actions, and link out to anarchist ‘hub’ site news-services and discussion forums, as well as to other blogs that discuss the Greek situation from an anarchist (or sympathetic) point of view. Blogging, of course, is not a new phenomenon, having been hailed over a decade ago as the ‘next big thing’ and already gone through a process of apparent decline and ‘Web 2.0’ resurgence (Lovink 2008). However, it seems to me that the most sustained dedicated (English-language) coverage of the situation in Greece came in the form of blogs, which brought together information, links, and media from around the web and off of the streets and served a narrativizing function. Four blogs are of primary interest to my discussion:

1. On the Greek Riots, hereafter: OtGR (www.occupiedlondon.org/blog)
2. Social War in Greece, hereafter: SWiG (greekiots.blogspot.com)
3. The Center for Strategic Anarchy, hereafter: CSA (anarchiststrategy.blogspot.com)
4. Tapes Gone Loose, hereafter: TGL (tapesgoneloose.blogspot.com)

These four blogs provided a great deal of information, and focused commentary on issues raised by the Greek unrest. The first two remain active at the time of writing (April 2009), while the third wrapped up in January. Although the first three provide mutual links (with the exception of CSA omitting SWiG), the TGL blog, active until mid-February, links to none – though TGL material has been re-posted/linked at OtGR and other prominent anarchist blogs. Typically, these blogs post relatively short updates, translations and commentary on the situation in Greece and allow readers to comment on posted items (and to respond to others’ comments).

Major anarchist ‘hub’ sites, such as libcom.org, infoshop.org and anarkismo.net also continued to present updates and generate some commentary and discussion, and were considered insofar as their content is relevant to this project. Discussion forums on these sites (and others, such as anarchistblackcat.org) provide another avenue of exploration, and an ‘anarchist RSS’ on Twitter proved invaluable in keeping up-to-date. Lest it seem that this focuses exclusively on text-based modes of communication, it is important to note that graphics, photos, video and comic-art productions are also a part of this virtual milieu, and that the (visual) aesthetic markers employed, while easily taken-for-granted, also merit consideration.

I sought to familiarize myself with this locus of investigation by examining the blogs noted and linking out to other sites with an eye both to surveying the range of available material – marking out a ‘web sphere’ (Schneider & Foot 2005) for analysis - and to participating in ongoing discussions of the significance and implications of the Greek riots and occupations, strikes and other actions. To this end, I clicked, read, viewed, posted comments, engaged others’ opinions, followed links and asked questions. My aim goes beyond the role of the ‘reader’ and foregrounds the more holistic experience of inhabiting the ‘web sphere’, and of interacting with others, albeit in ‘virtual’ co-presence, and in an asynchronous textual mode (though I should note that attempts at engaging

in discussion and debate via comments and forums were limited by the sharp decline in others' participation from January onwards). In this sense, I provide a cyberspace (or 'virtual') ethnography (Hine 2000). I supplemented my approach with three online interviews (see Kivits 2005) conducted via email with bloggers of interest. Of course, a single paper entails the elision of many facets of the online experience, concerns of participants and producers, and responses in interviews; the necessary exclusions are my own responsibility.

I have considered postings presented as public information as openly citable, whereas discussion content has been fictionalized, and basic confidentiality and consent assured for interviewees. In my participatory role I sought to avoid imposing myself on the discussion. Although I concluded that I could refrain from broadcasting my identity in this context, I resolved to answer any inquiry about my identity and purposes truthfully – and in fact maintained my own public blog on the project. I sought to draw on the approach to participatory and engaged theorization of anarchist movements recently suggested by Uri Gordon (2007b), and clearly relevant to others' call for more 'movement-relevant theory' (Bevington & Dixon 2005). The idea here is to take radical movements seriously, to engage endemic issues, and to avoid an overly detached perspective.

Blogging the Greek riots: against the 'mainstream'

As indicated, blogs can serve to narrativize events and bring together diverse sources – along with other sites, they organize a body of content and a group of people around a common set of concerns. Together, the sites examined form a set of networked pathways of linked content, a 'web sphere' which overlaps significantly with a pre-existing 'anarchist web' (Owens & Palmer 2003) organized around common interest in (multiple and sometimes conflicting) 'anarchist' perspectives, values and identifications. In the initial period of the Greek uprising in December, 'hub' sites bustled with stories and discussion; some blogs reportedly saw 10,000 hits a day, and were cited by mainstream media as 'primary' sources. The term 'snap mobs,' coined by Patrick Meier (2008) to describe quick-forming rebellious crowds swelled by new communications technologies, captures much of the early interest in the Greek uprising, and such aspects of the initial build-up have been well-scrutinized elsewhere. The effects of quick dissemination of eyewitness accounts and video from the scene of Grigoropoulos' shooting which countered official claims later discredited by official forensics are not to be discounted. However, I am interested here in what circulates through the networked pathways after the 'snap mobs' in Greece went home, and much of the world stopped watching.

Throughout the initial period, anarchist (and sympathetic) voices sought to counter mainstream accounts – and it seems that each protest occupation in Greece had its own blog. No less than Greek PM K. Karamanlis (2009) has suggested that blogs and new media are a boon to 'troublemakers,' indicating official displeasure with the possibilities raised. Past academic work has emphasized how the mainstream press is implicated in processes that privilege the views of 'primary definers' such as state officials, 'experts' and professional commentators in ways that tend to reinforce a (post-Gramscian) hegemonic outlook which assumes a putative cultural 'consensus' and frames events for wider publics (Hall et al. 1978). Such an analysis is echoed in 'poetic' Greek texts: "Politics is the politics of consensus; the rest is gang-war, riots, chaos". The structures of mainstream news-production are similarly liable to create their own 'folk devils,' distorting real events to fit such paradigms (Cohen 2002) – a position into which anarchists have been inserted in the past, notably in the context of alter-globalization demos (Owens & Palmer 2003; Rosie & Gorrington 2009). This often seems to serve state interests in de-legitimizing dissent – as can be inferred from Greek government rhetoric focusing on the supposedly objectless (i.e. not politically motivated, irrational, monstrous and incomprehensible) violent actions of a few hooded and masked 'anarchist' youth

and urban guerillas despite clear social tensions, widespread popular participation in December's uprising, and the articulate words and actions of many anarchists. The echoes of this and other distortions (and silences) are noted with unease by bloggers and addressed by independent sourcing and commentary which question and complexify. They provide content, as one blogger put it, which counters journalism that is "soddy, agenda-driven or simply carelessly lazy" while avoiding "projecting a Grand Unification Theory of What's Really Going on in Greece." It is my belief that both the raw communications capabilities and the experiential structure of online media 'browsing' (in which the user moves laterally – or 'diagonally' – through content, media types, relatively passive and interactive responses, diverse sources and genres of material) themselves dilute the authority of mainstream sources, especially across geographic distance. The juxtaposition (and blending) of genres presents a possibility for different 'language games' (Lyotard 1979), impassioned ethical discourses, economic analyses, 'objective' reporting, or poetic renderings, to be played out and experienced in the same big arena – highlighting the need to examine the integrative problems posed in the interstitial spaces between them. In part, at least in Call's (2003) analysis, hypertextuality contributes to a relative pluralization, destabilization and possible democratization of the claims to 'truth' in defining the social, power dynamics, and lived experience - and in describing aspects of refusal and resistance, and 'events' such as those cast under the rubric of the Greek uprising.

Of course, different sites take different approaches. Initial coverage often took the form of play-by-play accounts of protests, rioting, occupations and arrests (a mainstay of CSA coverage, for example). From January 2009, SWiG frequently re-posted mainstream coverage – particularly of attacks claimed by splinter groups engaged in bombing and firearms attacks against police, state and financial targets (what was by and large available), along with demo updates and items re-posted from OtGR and 'hub' site news services (which frequently operate on an IndyMedia model in which content is submitted by users, but not vetted or edited). OtGR and TGL provide an eclectic mix of non-mainstream news and images of occupations and anarchist-linked events, relating diverse struggles in Greece linked to prisons, the repression of dissent, precarious workers and immigrants, and translations of texts produced by anarchist collectives. Not only does this material present a more complex picture, it fuels the imaginations of anarchists (and sympathizers), and keeps people (including others not necessarily politicized) informed about issues ignored in the mainstream – and 'poetic' texts and visual elements contribute to resistance in novel ways that 'news' and historical context (though essential in themselves) do not.

Denouement or persistence?

The large numbers of people drawn into open rebellion in December focused mainstream media and early commentary. However, even after the more spectacular activity on the streets died down, online discussion and news from Greece continued – though only in some forums. By mid-January, as riotous activity lessened, several blogs shut the door on the Greek uprising: previously high-activity sites focused on reconstructing a closed-ended timeline of events, posting 'position papers' and 'wrap-ups' reflecting on the situation. Others became irregular, and comments dwindled from dozens to single digits or zero. In many cases, the Greek situation was used as a transition to other topics: notably to the police killing of Oscar Grant in Oakland, which sparked a riotous response, to the popular uprisings in Iceland which deposed the government there following an economic meltdown, to riotous unrest in Madagascar, Latvia and France, and to the then-burgeoning Israeli offensive on Gaza.

Broader connections were made with the context of the 'economic crisis' – said (by some) to connect unrest across Europe and to explain working-class/youth dissent feeding into the uprising. UK solidarity events posted at some sites shifted focus to generalize and re-locate the threads

of commonality, with slogans such as “Fuck Greece, Fight here!” – a sentiment echoed in one interviewee’s suggestion that those outside of Greece (in keeping with statements at an international day of solidarity) “should react wherever they are, under whatever condition of oppression, not in solidarity with the Greeks but on their own right – for themselves.”

Following the early-to-mid January lull, the SWiG, OtGR and TGL blogs persisted along with the dedicated few still posting on hub-site news services and discussion forums, who, like some of the bloggers, often appear to have connections to Greece in terms of life-history and language that position them to mediate the on-the-ground situation for non-Greek speakers internationally. It appears that most of the content here is the work of a small number, with particular bloggers, posters, and forum-participants providing a great deal of translation, updates, historical and contextual detail and interpretation (particularly relative to the number of comments and other forms of response on most sites during this period). Much of this ongoing coverage focuses on attempts to broaden the context from that of a direct response to the killing of Grigoropoulos by highlighting different cases, and providing intersectional analyses weaving these diverse struggles together.

The case of Konstantina Kouneva

One prominent case is that of Konstantina Kouneva, a cleaner and active radical syndicalist fighting for ‘precarious’ workers like herself, employed by subcontractors – often immigrants working under poor conditions without job security or benefits. She was attacked with acid on December 23, 2008, and suffered serious disfigurement in the life-threatening attack which radical-left on-the-ground and online sources present as likely the work of her employer, a subcontracting company owned by a member of Greece’s mainstream socialist party. Several posts and texts make links to her case as exemplary of women’s, immigrants’, radicals’ and precarious workers’ struggles against the forms of domination that they endure. One analyses the attack thus:

The attack against Konstantina Kuneva wasn’t a murderous one. Her likely death as a result of this attack was a secondary issue for the pigs who conducted it. The sulfuric acid was used for her stigmatisation, her degradation, her disgrace. For her return to order, to the domestic and private, to the role of woman.

Such instances illustrate the oppositional interpretations forwarded, and point to the tendency to analyze events in light of general dynamics, and to provide an ‘affected’ view. Similar efforts address legislation targeting protesters, new occupations in the spirit of the uprisings, attacks and counter-attacks involving anarchists and neo-fascist groups, and solidarity with radical prisoners.

Collective identity: what’s moving online?

Clearly, producers and frequenters of these sites share an interest in oppositional views of events in Greece. But is there more to it than that? Alberto Melucci (1996) suggests that a key element of ‘collective identity’ lies in “*cognitive definitions* concerning the ends, means and field of action” (70). The connections drawn between the Greek situation and diverse local and international contexts and concerns suggest a creative tendency to view a wide range of perceived (and usually very real) injustices as interlinked and analogous. At a general level, the connections and intersectional analyses weaving together diverse struggles can be viewed as a product of a certain ‘holistic’ tendency that connects not only with classical anarchism (though thinkers like Bakunin and Kropotkin have sometimes been faulted for essentializing human nature or marginalizing struggles outside the class-state nexus), but with more recent anti-oppression (feminist, anti-racist, queer) and anti-

imperialist movements. This general holistic thrust (along with a determination to take on these matters directly, to refuse representation, and to embrace difference) may inform a set of '*cognitive definitions*' and orientations. I think that, in this sense, elements of a possible 'collective identity' can be articulated among many post-December accounts of the Greek situation via Uri Gordon's idea of 'contemporary anarchism as a political culture' marked by three 'conceptual clusters':

(a) the construction of the concept of 'domination' and the active opposition to all its forms and systems, (b) the ethos of direct action as a primary mode of political engagement, both destructive and constructive, and (c) the open-ended, experimental approach to revolutionary visions and strategies, which endorses epistemological pluralism and is strongly grounded in present tense action. (2007:29)

The key concept of 'domination' for Gordon is best described as "a disvalue: what anarchists want to negate [...] a generic concept for the various systematic features of society whereby groups and persons are controlled, coerced, exploited, humiliated, discriminated against, etc.—all of which dynamics anarchists seek to uncover, challenge and erode" (2007:37-38). This, I think, is a good summation of some common definitions of the type Melucci holds central to collective identity, applicable to much of the content examined. Common to almost all of the material I encountered was a (greater or lesser) willingness to engage other points of view that fit within this kinds of framework, and a corresponding distaste for vanguardist or authoritarian visions of social change (as made highly visible in reactions to comments posted on blogs by 'trolling' Leninists and state-socialists). They also share a distinct inclination to emphasize 'direct action' (which can be 'constructive' in the case of public protest, the re-articulation of everyday relations, self-organization to build alternative communities and institutions which contest, supplant or evade systems of domination such as the capital-state nexus), and a tendency which seeks concepts of domination that can weave together events as diverse as a pensioners' march, a farmers' strike, and protest acts targeting Athens' mayor for "the mass murder of trees," or targeting the range of repressive new state security measures.

However, this is not to imply that *anything goes* (as long as it opposes the hegemonic discourses and structural configurations of the dominant social, political and economic order). The generality of the shared definitions/orientations marked out here does provide the basis for some degree of boundary-maintenance (Taylor & Whittier 1992) but also elides many very real axes of difference and points of division among those involved in the coverage and discussion of the Greek situation (as it does in other contexts, both on- and offline). Contestation over key terms in the anarchist lexicon often frame tactical and strategic differences. The term 'direct action' can be taken to imply not only 'constructive' but also 'destructive' activity such as physical confrontation with police and other authorities, the destruction of property, interference with infrastructure, etc. Indeed, this is not an insignificant current in anarchist circles – and one which is highly relevant here. Some blogs and other sites tend to focus extensively on, and celebrate quite uncritically, these kinds of tactics, whether they be gluing the locks at a local bank, setting explosives (from a Molotov cocktail to a truck bomb), smashing store-fronts, paint-bombing, even mounting armed attacks on police and other representatives of the state and capital. One such blog which covered the Greek uprising seeks to provide:

an open database on sabotage-vandalism-rioting and any action of physical confrontation with capitalism, its developments and its agents. Among other things, direct action is a field of liberated communication without the need of formal organizations and political parties.

Further examples include the ‘The Ultimate Riot Collection,’ a 30-part YouTube series depicting violent clashes and property destructions (with some nearing 100,000 views as of writing) or the ‘World Wide Riots’ blog, which presents international news items featuring rioting. Discussion and commentary often tends to take a dim view of this type of coverage, arguing not only that destructive and confrontational approaches may be counter-productive, but that the online re-dissemination of these incidents and images is distracting and meaninglessly detached from context, describing them as ‘riot porn.’

Orientations regarding violence and public disorder are not always clear-cut. Indeed, the initial focus on Greece – as a scene of riotous uprising – indicates an interest in confrontational actions. In the post-December period, this became increasingly problematic as the initial widespread street actions gave way to oppositional manifestations in ongoing and new occupations (Universities and ad hoc ‘social centres’), protest in solidarity with prisoners of the revolt or relating to the Kouneva case, issues of local significance (such as the razing of urban green spaces), or in reaction to attacks by neo-fascist elements. None of these received significant international mainstream coverage, though one ‘direct action’ demo targeting storefronts in a wealthy shopping district did make headlines. Meanwhile, urban-guerilla type actions carried out by Baader-Meinhof-esque splinter groups (who claim responsibility under names such as the ‘Sect of Revolutionaries’) continued to generate both local and episodic international mainstream coverage. Such cases included an attack with automatic weapons against a police post, an ambush of patrolling officers in which one was seriously wounded by gunfire, and a series of bombings targeting banks, state and capitalist institutions (as in the later attack against the Athens stock exchange) and the right-wing press. One prolific discussion-group poster suggested to me that this militaristic approach, based in a longer tradition linked to the N17 group which grew out of the 1973 movements against the military junta and its vestiges in subsequent Greek administrations, has been a significant part of the Greek anarchist scene since the mid-1990s and in his view is not linked to any ‘grassroots’ movement. Although the same poster tended to lump such other activities as erecting barricades and smashing storefronts into the same category, he also indicated that these could be appropriate in some circumstances.

The SWiG blog, to provide another example, presented an ambiguous reaction to the ‘Sect of Revolutionaries’ type attacks, re-disseminated mainstream accounts of which composed a great deal of their coverage post-December (with tags like ‘officer down’). However, this may well have as much to do with the limited nature of this blog, largely re-posting material produced elsewhere (at one point, they re-posted a great deal of more ‘alternative’ material from OtGR). Blogs such as OtGR, TGL and others explicitly refrain from (uncritical) focus on these types of attacks on the basis that that they are already covered disproportionately in the mainstream, that their links to broader struggles and more ‘productive’ direct actions are tenuous, or that they are sometimes claimed to be the work of ‘non-anarchists’ or agents provocateurs. One blogger characterized these attacks as having “assumed center stage thus stripping the people of their own struggle (when the guns come out, the sensible majority go home...& no majority means no change).”

Visual aesthetics in anarchist representations of the uprising

Having described some of the connections drawn with diverse struggles and outlined the basis of some ‘common understandings’ and divisions, I now wish to take a turn to some aesthetic and ‘poetic’ aspects as they relate to elements of a possible ‘collective identity’ and (anarchist) activist imaginary. At the easily taken-for-granted level of the (visual) aesthetic elements of sites I looked at, I found images of large crowds, fires in the streets, youths (sometimes masked) running or gathering, ad hoc barricades, broken glass, giant banners hung from occupied buildings (including

the Acropolis) and images of Grigoropolous or Kouneva accompany more basic iconographic signals such as the black-and-red anarchist/libertarian-communist star, the circle-A anarchist symbol (sometimes presented in photographs of graffiti or banners from Greece). Sites often employ black-and-white or grey background and layout, commonly highlighted with red or by images that include flames raging in a dark urban scene (as in the case of an image, captioned 'Merry Xmas from Athens' of the giant Christmas tree in front of the Greek Parliament set alight by protesters). I should, however, note that the TGL blog, for example, offers fewer of these cues with its rose/pink layout (and as noted, does not link out to the other sites or express an 'anarchist' affiliation, except perhaps by the selection of texts and sympathetic perspective). TGL does, nonetheless, include images of riot police, in one instance depicting the classic radical-left trope of youths confronting them with...flowers.

Video and other visual content adds to the range of what is presented, not always in the form of documentary/news-type footage. Dartnell (2006: 98-104) describes online activists' use of 'multimedia artifacts' that blend words and images into aesthetically complex narratives and which address emotional and moral responses in the viewer; an example of such artifacts here might be the montage of footage and still images distributed under the title 'The Potentiality of Storming Heaven' via the AthensIMC-associated torrent site <black-tracker.gr>. Online discussions, while uneasy with the 'riot porn' qualities of this amalgam of footage prominently featuring clashes with police, carnivalesque protest and property destruction overlaid with a dark, gritty urban aesthetic (featuring a great deal of night footage illuminated by flames) and a pounding soundtrack, more than once point to its compelling qualities. The video includes interviews with rioters and full-length narration of the poetic type I will address shortly, cuing the uprising as a response to quotidian disaffection, social and economic precarity, and disgust with corruption and exploitation, social ills juxtaposed with 'anarchy' and hope. Punk and hip-hop music of a decidedly political flavour, Flickr pages of protest scenes, slideshows of burnt-out cars and riot police, sinister illustrations of figures clearly identified as police, and coarse black-and-white comic images provide a rich supplement. One comic, for example, narrates a UK protester's solidarity with Grigoropoulos and parallels perceived with Israeli aggression in Palestine, bombing in Afghanistan and the arms trade at home. Another depicts a fanciful urban landscape alit around two cartoon figures with the caption: "Now everything is burning. What do we do now?"

Some of these elements, riot images in particular, link to a kind of 'black bloc' aesthetic and logic of refusal, by violence if necessary, the day-to-day (and the paroxysmal, as in the case of unjustified police killings) violence and domination of the capitalist state. Here, the police represent the ultimate recourse of the powerful, the sometimes brutal contact point between (anarchist) struggle and the hegemonic order (see Dupuis-Deri 2007). Even anarchist (and sympathetic) commentators critical of 'violence' seem to approve (if tacitly) of the riotous activity of the initial uprising. Discussions in this vein tend to focus on whether property destruction and clashes with police are 'effective' or 'alienate the wider population' who need to be swayed. In the post-December period, this concern seems well-placed; as noted, it is often suggested that the bombings and firearms attacks of the 'Sect of Revolutionaries' and others are counter-productive, that these groups are misguided, or even that they may be agents-provocateurs. Counter-attacks, for example, by anarchists against neo-fascist groups such as Golden Dawn – for instance in early March 2009, when that group's headquarters was torched following a grenade attack on an anarchist social centre – tend to be looked to with more approval. The anarchist concern with 'direct action', while controversial in its definitions, often sets itself in opposition to strictly pacifist tactical commitments – anarchists are those who will take action, will defend themselves and overturn (or at least challenge) the forces of order.

Counter-spectacular ‘poetic’ texts, postmodern anarchism and the virtual

In this section, I wish to focus on translated and reproduced ‘poetic’ texts from anarchist sources in Greece as a supplement to alternative ‘news’ and commentary. This in turn concerns another tension between focus on the logistics of organization, strategy, empirico-theoretical analysis and appeals to the ‘common sense’ of the working class – a more modernist, unified-class-struggle-oriented anarchism – and what Lewis Call (2003) describes as ‘postmodern anarchism,’ which emphasizes that the critique of contemporary political economy (and other dynamic systems of the dominant political, economic and social order), à la Baudrillard, “must stand entirely *outside* that seemingly hegemonic system” (8). For Call, crossover with certain contemporary feminisms, socialisms and subaltern theories are key in attempts to undermine the effects of the everyday micro-political forces that undergird the social reproduction mechanisms of the larger and more apparent structures of formal power. This takes up a neo-Situationist flavour concerned with the “momentary ambiances of everyday life,” (Debord 1957) and with creating spaces which evade routine strictures. Such spaces could be those of the riot, the occupation – even ‘the virtual.’ This vision is ‘postmodern’ in that it takes the realm of simulation (or the spectacle) as a primary field of struggle – though obviously without abandoning ‘direct action’. This tendency is often dismissed or vilified by more ‘traditional’ anarchists and leftists (bloggers are no exception) as providing no solid plan, failing to include the wider population, being no more than ‘mere abstraction’ – though it persists nonetheless.

And this ‘postmodern’ aspect is highlighted by the selection and translation of ‘poetic’ political texts for reproduction online as much as in such raucous, music-filled and carnivalesque occupations as the Lyriki Scene opera house in Athens or more recently, adjacent to the Athens Polytechnic, and in the strikingly visual emphasis in cartooning, still and moving images (including the ‘Potentiality of Storming Heaven’ video). I was particularly struck by these texts from those involved in occupations and campaigns – reminiscent of the now radical-left-ubiquitous pronouncements of the Zapatista’s Subcomandante Marcos (captured in one blog-post citation of his words: “we acquired a consciousness of language not as a way of communicating with each other but as a way of building something”). These texts provide a view that would otherwise not be known or preserved outside of its geographic context, what one blogger describes as “trench poetry” which seeks a politicization that exceeds any limited ‘tactical’ consideration, and refuses to present the recent Greek uprising as an isolated event (with a putative ending in the symbolic restoration of ‘order’ on the streets) – and which both reinforces anarchist affinities and presents a symbolic challenge to movement opponents. As expressed in a statement from the Lyriki Scene occupation:

[W]e extend a call to every worker to redefine his role inside the dominant relations & structures. The artists of life are not the jokers of authority, We do not want to become human flashbang grenades in the artillery of psychological repression, but [rather] fireworks of joy & deep feeling on the road towards societal liberation.

Or in a Valentine’s Day statement by ‘December’s love children,’ reveling in juxtaposition:

“Everything in its place: Everything was in place! The starving in Africa. The ‘specialists’ on TV. The ‘bad ones’ in prison. The ‘anarchists’ in Exarchia square. Those deciding in the parliament. Our money on loans. The police around the next corner,” with “The End of Discipline. Magical Life: Those starved in the parliament, the specialists in Exarchia square, the bad ones in dieting institutes, the anarchists in museums & galleries, those deciding on 14 February, our money in Syntagma square on Xmas [...]”

These texts, manifesting the symbolic challenge emphasized by Call, are brought into a translocal virtual space by the work of some bloggers. They take up – and frequently reference – Debord's (1983) call to resist 'the spectacle' – a social relation mediated by images, somewhat akin to Hall's post-Gramscian view of the hegemonic 'consensual' frame, but more radical in its challenge to the commoditization of time and the estrangement of lived experience. Like Debord, they seek to use existing concepts "simultaneously aware of their rediscovered fluidity, their necessary destruction" (ibid: 205). Call places Debord, in a fashion relevant here, along a theoretical trajectory towards Baudrillard's notion of simulation; both imply a battle for the boundaries of social, spatio-temporal 'actuality'.

Shields' (2003) notion of 'the virtual' is perhaps of use in clarifying the analytical status of this contestation. He describes the virtual as a necessary category in describing the possible impact of social (or activist) imaginaries on the unfolding actualization of events. The virtual is "real, but not actual; ideal but not abstract" (206). Pertinently, this consideration displaces critiques of ideas (such as those of anarchists) as 'merely utopian' and emphasizes the action of the ideal on the 'actual' in social processes. Social scientists, he points out, routinely deal in 'virtuality' when claims are made about 'underlying' social processes, as these are not articulated mechanisms, but posited dynamics 'in essence, if not in fact' (ibid: 32). Yet much academic writing (like the routine framing of mainstream news, the legitimating discourses of politico-economic institutions or critiques in the language of political economy) is flatly formal, neutered of its voice, of the 'virtual' point of reference (implying 'virtue') which might render it compelling to a wider audience (Rombes 2008). A striking parallel lies in the number of 'poetic' texts that refer to the apparent threat of being 'sociologized,' of the state bringing in their sociologists, psychologists and anthropologists to rein in those who are too 'affected,' who will not behave (as in the statement issued from the Athens School of Business 11/12/2008).

However, Rombes suggests that the *auteur* is everywhere (else), and blogging is part of the picture: the departure from dry factuality is ascendant – and this is desirable. He cites Baudrillard's *The Perfect Crime*: "As for ideas, everyone has them. What counts is the poetic singularity of the analysis. That alone can justify writing, not the wretched critical objectivity of language. There will never be any resolving of the contradictoriness of ideas, except in the energy and felicity of language" (cf. Rombes 2008: 438-439).

This strikes me as an excellent lens towards the 'poetic' texts which appear to operate by contesting the 'spectacular' representation of society to itself without leaning on dry factuality and emphasizing 'the virtual' as real, as entering into the processes of actualization in the 'social experiments' accompanying the uprising and ongoing opposition in Greece, and by mobilizing affect, by rocking the symbolic spatio-temporal containers that limit opposition, uprising and the (anarchist) activist imaginary to short, discrete and locally-bounded events.

Conclusions: Online spaces of resistance

I have sought to describe anarchist (and sympathetic) online efforts to counter mainstream accounts of the Greek uprising, some diverse connections and intersectional analyses made, and how these may be seen to constitute a general (but heterogeneous and often divided) set of common definitions. This should shed some light on the kinds of analytic frames that guide much of the contestation I discuss. However, it strikes me as important to emphasize more aesthetic elements as well. Aside from '*cognitive definitions*,' Melucci (1996:71) also cites "*emotional investments*" as essential to 'collective identity'. I think that these aesthetic elements point to a bridge between the two categories, and

that both riot images and destabilizing poetic pronouncements draw on an energetic common feeling (aligned against the commoditization of time, of life, of space itself) that is channeled in a refusal to address the formal structures of power as petitioners (see Day 2007). This energy has distinctively moral and emotional aspects, evoking Michel Maffesoli's (1996) distinction between 'the social' and 'sociality' in which the former consists in modern forms, rationalized, individuating and functional, while the latter is 'post-modern', linking persons via "the collective sensibility which issues from the aesthetic form [and] results in an ethical sensibility" (76). Such an emphasis is common to the kinds of 'poetic' texts examined, and emerging in some engaged academia as well (e.g. Day 2005, 2007; St. John 2008). The counter-spectacular symbolic challenge furnishes something better than the hegemonic visions of political economy and supposed 'consent' of a post-facto 'social contract', or at least displaces some portion of 'the spectacle.' It is hard to deny that there are concrete, specific and limited events at the heart of this story: the death of Alexis at the hands of the police, for example – but the way many counter-mainstream narratives have it, it is much more. Online technologies allow those outside of flashpoints like Greece to 'participate' in events via the virtual space of (alternative) global mediascapes. While some anarchists suggest that the internet as a whole is just another manifestation of 'the spectacle' (*Black Cat* 'Zine 1995, cf. Atton 2002), I believe that separating 'authentic,' 'real-life' experience from the virtual is difficult. As Pierre Levy (cf. Shields 2003: 205) puts it, "it is important that we try to accompany and give meaning to virtualization." Surely no replacement for engaged on-the-ground action, online virtual spaces have been used to ends which contribute to the elaboration of an oppositional 'collective identity' and to an (anarchist) activist imaginary that actively resists the foreclosure of the uprising in Greece – or of any struggle against domination – as a limited and isolated 'event.' In emphasizing that the uprising is not 'over,' take these lines from issued from one occupation adjacent to the Athens Polytechnic, entitled 'Carrying on: the coming revolt is already everywhere!,' translated and reproduced on OtGR:

The biggest expectations lie ahead of us and we find ourselves in the joyous position of seeking ways to drift along with them.

[The December uprising] abolished, even if temporarily, gendered and spectacular roles since thousands of people managed to act as one body amidst events where what mattered was what was happening, not who was doing it.

Reality continues to gain meaning from December's revolt in an accelerating manner.

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