Urban social movements in Southern European cities
Reflections on Toni Negri’s *The Mass and the Metropolis*

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This paper discusses some of the ideas presented by Toni Negri concerning the impact of urban social movements, especially his suggestion that such movements are in a position to radically alter the capitalist urban system since the metropolis incorporates the idea of the single, unitary mass as well as of the collective mass, in actions such as general strikes. After a critical examination of this analysis, the paper places emphasis on political culture and introduces the concept of ‘deferentially intertwined cultures’, where citizens irrespective of ideological, political or social differences and temporary conflicts, essentially reproduce specific types of cultural politics. These are symbiotic rather than conflicting cultures and tend to legitimize private appropriation and exploitation of urban space. This is illustrated by looking at the role of civil society in the city of Athens with regard to combating urban pollution and mobilizing for the Olympic Games.

‘Inaction is a weapon of mass destruction’—Faithless

Since the late 1990s protest movements have sprung up all over the world disputing, often bitterly, dominant political and ideological hegemony, forming what we have come to recognize now as the anti-globalization movement. The ‘spaces of dissent’ which these movements occupy are usually urbanized areas where large numbers of people take over the streets disrupting ‘normality’ via the expression of a particular variety of angry cultural world politics. Yet it is particularly difficult to engage in a debate on whether these movements produce new and alternative forms of popular dissent, or whether they are merely another part of what Immanuel Wallerstein (1983) and others have called anti-systemic movements. Mark Purcell (2003, p. 564) rightly argues that ‘in order to resist the growing dominance of capital in the global political economy, one critical project is to develop new notions of citizenship that extend the limits of politics and expand the decision-making control of citizens’. However, this has always been an underlying political project of a variety of urban groups which attempted, with some temporary success, to initiate forms of cultural and political resistance, generating the category ‘urban social movement’ as it was first introduced by Castells in 1977 and elaborated in his work *The City and the Grassroots* (1983).

The political issues mentioned above are reflected in a booklet published in Greek in 2003 presenting a collection of nine short articles by Toni Negri on what he calls *The
Mass and the Metropolis: A Few Notes Hypothesizing on Researching Temporality in Global Cities. These texts, which first appeared in the daily newspaper Il Manifesto and in the magazines Posse and Multitudes, focus primarily on the interconnection between recent strikes and other actions in Italy and elsewhere, placing the city as a space where production relations are formed as expressions of capitalist accumulation and, as expressions of popular and class demands for change. The question remains: is the city a place where collective identity can be formulated or is it the locale of a multitude of fragmented identities which form particular varieties of political cultures? Furthermore, which type of city do we need to refer to in order to examine various forms of political action?

A fundamental issue Toni Negri raises is related to whether and how workers can stand against the discipline of employment and the violence inherent in exploitation. As he claims, we should ponder on how the metropolis is appearing before the masses and whether it is right to argue that contemporary metropolitan space is for the mass what the old industrial factory was for the working class. Although Toni Negri mildly accepts various analyses on the hybrid and fragmented nature of the contemporary urban context, he insists that it is possible to argue that by introducing the idea of the urban puzzle new and alternative commonalities can be generated, elements of a common life and struggle. The new metropolis incorporates the idea of the single, unitary mass as well as of the collective mass. He therefore suggests that actions such as general strikes point to the fact that there are elements of society which occupy the ‘metropolis’ and which are in a position to change it. In this, he inadvertently rejects postmodern thought which, he claims, views the metropolis as continuously reinvented space thus weakening the possibility of oppositional politics.

Toni Negri became politically active in Italy during the mid to late 1950s, a time when left-wing thought and action was booming and the city and public space were used as nodal points for ‘doing’ or ‘experiencing’ politics. Movements from all areas of social life were established such as, for example, the Situationist International (SI) in 1957. This was a movement which came out of avantgarde groups such as the ‘Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus’ and a group led by Guy Debord called the ‘Lettrist International’ (Merrifield, 2005). The SI lasted, more or less, until 1969 and during that time, alongside other important movements, a significant number of ideas were developed and put into practice, some of which are still valuable today and have been used by postmodern theorization, such as integrated city-creation, unitary urbanism, psychogeography, play as a free and creative activity and an appeal to indolence or paresse. In short, these movements generated the tradition of unorthodox rebellion. Instead of defining contemporary society in more traditional left-wing terms connected to class-exploitation, surplus value and the need for awareness and class consciousness, they presented the idea that society ought to be viewed as an agglomeration of spectacles, or as a spectacle itself. In order to achieve change, the need to move away from so-called traditional forms of action was strongly proclaimed and some more demanding forms of action connected to imagination, creativity, desire and pleasure were put forward.

Whether the Western European city has been transformed as a result of their political project, remains an open question. The problem is how to connect the actions taken at local level with global economic and social policies to which they are inadvertently vulnerable. Perhaps the city was (is) transformed due to ideas and practices of smaller groups in conjunction to social and political ideas of other larger interest parties such as firms, the media and the state. Toni Negri’s thesis on the position of the mass in the metropolis refutes the idea that political cultures are permeable to one another and attempts to restore the vision of a unitary
radical resistance politics which occurs in the city and which has the capacity to fundamentally regenerate urban space and the economy. In fact, Hardt and Negri argue elsewhere (2000) that capital has subsumed social life as a whole putting forward the idea that ‘... the Empire does not create division but rather recognizes existing or potential differences, celebrates them, and manages them within a general economy of command’ (p. 201). Thus within his work the two concepts of emancipation and reification-alienation appear interchangeably in a very similar fashion to Marx’s analysis of capitalism and his urge for revolution in the Communist Manifesto.

Edward Said argues in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) that ‘... such concepts as “imperialism” have a generalized quality that masks with an unacceptable vagueness the interesting heterogeneity of Western metropolitan cultures’ (p. 162). A similar proposition could be made against the overarching categories of ‘Empire’ and the ‘metropolitan masses’ which tend not to distinguish between different varieties of (g)local political cultures and their usually not so profound relationship to political regimes.

Negri’s work can be used as a starting point to argue our case on the basis of South European experiences, in a sense relating these cities with their intellectual figures, as has been done in the past with Gramsci and his notion of ‘spontaneity’ for urban social movements in Mediterranean Europe (Leontidou, 1990, 1996). More specifically, Negri’s notions of ecumenical vs. local cultures acquire a specific twist in the context of the Athenian urban landscape, a space which is very different from classic paradigms of metropolitan life, such as the ones usually quoted and analysed in academic literature, of London, Paris or New York. In Athens, the various political, cultural, social and/or economic agendas used by action groups have only recently begun to be discussed and questions are raised with respect to how these are formulated and whether they are part of bottom-up needs or top-down policies. Do these groups form part of a wider social movement or is there an attempt to re-invent political identity? This last point also refers to what Terry Eagleton called the shift from politicized culture towards cultural politics when he argued that most contemporary societies are products of a cluster of sub-cultures rather than one dominant hyper-culture (2003, p. 137). Within this framework Ulrich Beck (1996) makes a similar point when he says that political subjectivity is reborn through the actions and agendas of a variety of small groups of people which have put forward over the last 10–15 years various issues ranging from ecology to saving the world and managing to bring those to the forefront of institutional politics.

The issue of the city and the urban environment in Athens is quite significant with respect to whether one may or may not advocate a renewed generation of the urban movement. The city of Athens has an interesting history of informal work coupled by illegal building and construction developed at least over the past 40 years (Leontidou, 1990). These are outcomes of the reproduction of an informal sector which depends heavily on top-down political (in)decisions which allow for the destruction of the natural environment, peculiar forms of semi-legitimate–illegitimate’ suburbanization and recently, sublime politics to promote car use. These are (in)decisions supported by the ‘urban mass’ be it working or middle class. Public space has been continuously eradicated, privatized by a mix of organizations such as local authorities, neighbourhood associations and a variety of special interest lobbies ranging from small shop-owners to larger construction developers. This multi-dimensional mix of local and other agents such as architects, academics and universities, politicians and the media and ecology groups, functions through the use of complicated agendas which incorporate the articulation of clientelist relations with one another and also with any and/or all political parties and with the church. It also functions
through a multitude of relatively new strategies for pressure such as the use of the media and/or the pressure exercised by, for example, ecology groups to participate in the decision-making process regarding environmental policy.

This variety of urban politics seems to be, in contrast to Toni Negri, a mutant of itself. The effects of this type of mass collaboration are seen in the creation of a particular system or form of production and consumption of urban space. Contrary to Harvey's (1973) forceful analysis of the city and the built environment where he argues that spatiality in capitalism reflects the system's inherent injustices, Athens may be seen as an experiment on how to eradicate urban dissent by incorporating multiple voices. The Greek version of the 'social contract', namely, client and patronage relations, has been re-negotiated through individual private consumption and production of space and this sort of political culture has been diffused to all parts of society. We have called this 'deferentially intertwined culture' (Afouxenidis, 2004, 2005), where citizens irrespective of ideological, political or social differences and temporary conflicts finally come to synergy in reproducing a particular form of cultural politics, namely, the private appropriation of the city. These are, in fact, symbiotic rather than conflicting cultures.

An example of this variety of urban cultural politics, is related to the activity of ecological non-governmental organizations (NGOs): the environmental sector which in Greece developed out of the leftist movement of the 1970s and 1980s and also by people coming back from abroad, seems quite well networked at a European, regional and local level and successful in developing a variety of lobbying strategies. One of its characteristics is that on many occasions, groups collaborate with other similar organizations, exchanging information and technological know-how. Moreover, members of the directive board of one environmental NGO are participating in the directive board of another organization and on many occasions become advisors to the government. However, a significant part of the action of the environmental organizations is based on the pressure that EU legislative frameworks put on the Greek government. The EU environmental legislation became a point of reference for NGO activity and is used to put pressure on political decisions of the Greek government on environmental issues. In other words, much of its political agenda runs parallel to EU directives instead of developing out of local initiatives.

The issue of transport, for example, in terms of NGO activity, is very much underdeveloped and this fact stands in opposition to the actual nature of the problem itself. Although people complain about transportation problems and car congestion, this issue has not been taken up by environmental groups. This at first seems to indicate a low level of bottom-up relationship between organizations and communities or individuals. But more systematic interpretation is required in order to see the possible connection between car ownership and car-culture in Athens and the political agenda promoted by environmental groups who do not wish to directly challenge the established order. In general, cars have ceased to be a luxury in Greece quite recently (over the past 10 years or so) and car ownership has rocketed. This was achieved mainly because banks and automobile sellers substantially reduced the prices of small and medium range models and started to hand out cheap loans to people wanting to buy new vehicles. Their strategy had very quick results: usually two and on frequent occasions three cars are used by each family in Athens for a variety of reasons which are not strictly related to getting to and from work, or to visit the local shopping centre. Car ownership and the type(s) of car people possess signify more than visions of prosperity or wealth; in fact many people use cars they cannot really afford. The government also played an important role in promoting car sales by minimizing import taxes and other taxation on new vehicles,
thus encouraging consumption. This was a deliberate political move which in a single stroke satisfied a demanding public, the automobile businesses and the petrol corporations, all of which form in fact a substantial majority of what can be generally called 'civil society'. Another interesting twist to this story is related to whether the actual cost of Athenian urban transport is gradually moving away from government and/or local authorities onto individuals and families. Against this background most environmental NGOs have chosen to promote some types of phenomena as relevant to the problems of the urban environment and virtually ignore the issue of heavy car use. Interestingly enough, even on the very few occasions that car use is mentioned, it is placed alongside other issues such as waste-disposal management, recycling and the quality of drinking water. It can be suggested here that this is an ontological as well as a political decision on the part of these organizations. They selectively fail to adequately explain the nature of the problem not only because they do not wish to challenge public opinion, potential members and/or funding sources, but also because they themselves are inevitably subsumed by the powerful cultural discourse of car ownership.

A second example refers to the recent, over-publicized, Athens Olympic Games, where for different reasons almost all individuals, groups and associations, identified with the event in the end, if not initially or discursively. Even in cases where the environment was bluntly spoiled by the need for heavy infrastructural development, ecological groups did not put a forceful argument across, perhaps knowing that it would be taken apart by the ‘euphoria’ of staging such an event and would very quickly—just as in the case of car use—diminish any sort of sympathy with the general public but more importantly with other agencies from which they receive funding donations and other forms of support.2 The Olympic Games was the main stage where all varieties of mass urban cultural politics were played out in a very short period of time during early and mid-2004. Primarily there was an appeal to the need for heavy infrastructural development for which the city was in dire need and through which Athens, suddenly, was to be transformed from a parochial city, albeit interesting in an ethnic sort of way, into a global metropolitan player. This new player could now attract more investment from abroad for yet more development projects, but also become a kind of eastern Mediterranean location for upgraded affluent tourists. These arguments were utilized by analysts for a significant period of time. Very few were bothered to examine the possible impact on Athenian urbanization, the cost and/or the benefit from staging such an event. The keywords were, and to an extent still are, profit, investment and commercial tourist centre in a tremendous effort to sell absolutely everything, including the manufactured cultural product. Scattered voices of dissent and resistance questioned the above but were clearly ineffective and were suppressed by a well set up ‘volunteer’ propaganda mechanism in which television and the press played the primary role. At best, these voices were regarded as romantic and disillusioned, at worst, as unpatriotic. Even in cases where concern was raised due to reports of increasing numbers of work-related accidents and deaths at the Olympic construction sites, it was quickly discounted, neglected and finally forgotten.

Another exposé of dominant discourse, was related to the idea that the games are returning to their original birthplace, and rightly so. This has had an impact on a resurgent nationalism, a renewed variety of pride and the (re)discovery of national identity. People were supposed to go back to their roots, to their glorious ancient past and understand that to be supreme requires a degree of humbleness and humility—a kind of imperial sense of justice to those others who are not like us. ‘Our’ cultural product—the games—has come back to ‘us’ and ‘we’ are the only ones who can truly stage it just as we are the only ones who can stage the
classical plays and tragedy in their original form.

Finally, a third exposé, was (is) related to the possible advancement of Athens before, during and after the games, as a cultural centre. The local authority, and others, promoted the idea that galleries will open, artists will come, derelict buildings will be renovated, public space will be re-used for the benefit of all with open air events and happenings. In other words, the city itself was sold as contemporary urban space where high culture almost automatically was invented, produced and joyfully consumed by a motivated and aware public. Irrespective of supposed great differences in ideology, the Athenian urban majority accepted that the so-called Olympic culture can be sold to an obscure global community, whereas in fact it was this community through its agencies and organizations that has sold it to the Athenian public.

This bears heavy resemblance to another form of identification, that of the individual with commodities, in short with consumption. It can be argued that this is an attempt to escape from the alienation and boredom of everyday life. However, once the commodity is consumed an immediate loss is felt, recharging an endless search for quick satisfaction. Toni Negri’s belief in the ultimate strengths of the metropolis which will bring an end to this regime of accumulation is based on a post-Enlightenment utopian view of the city as a space of liberation. However, the Athenian example points more to the Baudrillardian narrative that meaning has been lost and there is not much difference between the advertised and the real. This can also be seen in the unanimity of most urban ecological and other groups which promote ideas about the protection of nature, while inadvertently participating in the consumption of physical commodities and, more importantly, of social commodities or signs from which social status and identity are derived. This last point, namely, uncontested appropriation, has become the main characteristic of the contemporary urban context in Athens.

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Notes

1 According to field research by the author (2003–2005) on occasion of the EU research project CIVGOV—Organised Civil Society and European Governance—coordinated by the Hellenic Open University [Lila Leontidou] for Greece and led by Universita di Trento as a network of 12 universities and institutes, funded by the EU.

2 Even some of the strongest objections against, for example, building the stadium for rowing in an environmentally sensitive area near Marathon, eventually petered out.

References


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