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“Political and Cultural Dimensions of Collective Action:

The Case of the Squatting Movement in Greece at the end of the 20th century”

Abstract

The core theoretical issue this paper is dealing with is related to the importance of cultural components of the political process for the formation of collective identities. By focusing on unseen aspects of the post-dictatorship political culture, it is sought to understand social mobilizations and developments of historical importance. In particular, it is attempted to analyze and interpret empirical and qualitative findings regarding the political and cultural dimensions of the “Squatting Movement” in Greece. Informal collectives that occupy abandoned public buildings in order to turn them into autonomous spaces and at the same time to cope with their accommodation problems seem to blur the limits between the “public” and the “private”. Squats reclaim urban space through collective action and attempt to put forward a new conception of politics that move beyond the dominant institutional framework.

Not a housing movement, a political movement

At this point, it should be made clear that this paper deals with political squats in Greece, which should be seen mainly as integral parts of the anarchist/anti-authoritarian “scene”. In contrast to other European countries, political squatters in Greece never achieved to form a massive housing movement. Despite the high rent prices and the lack of qualitative housing standards, people in Greece never considered squatting as a realistic solution to their accommodation problems, except for several homeless individuals, immigrants and gypsies, who could be described as “non-political” squatters. It is a fact though that the grand majority of people in Greece always chose to cope with their housing problems in other –less risky– ways. It is quite characteristic that a lot of young –or even not so young– natives prefer to live with their parents.

Apart from the financial reasons, this phenomenon is also based on certain cultural dimensions of Greek mentality and especially on the crucial role of the nuclear family in Greek society. Moreover, due to the dictatorship (1967-1974) –the colonels' regime widely known as ‘junta’–, it is frequently considered that the grand majority of Greek students and workers lost the chance to actively participate in what is usually called “the global 1968”. In other words, it seems that the rebellious spirit of this period did not have immediate effects in Greece, but took a few years to fully explode into an uprising.

1973-1981: Early background

In fact, the first libertarian/anti-authoritarian activities in modern Greece appeared in the uprising against the “junta” that broke out in the Polytechnic School of Athens on November 1973. During the last years of the dictatorship, and especially after it, independent publishing houses started to translate important foreign books into Greek, introducing the theoretical work of political collectives such as “Situationist International”, the “Provos”, the “Yippies” and “Socialism or Barbarism”. At the same time, activists visited European squats and shared their experiences through “underground” magazines and books. Under these influences, the gradual development of a new conception of politics, that put forward the “revolution of everyday life” and somehow formed the theoretical background for the emergence of squats in Greece, started to become noticeable. In 1979, as an act of protest against an education bill, Greek students occupied several universities, spreading the practice of occupying across the country.

1981: The first “wave”

In October of 1981, a few days after the first electoral victory of the Socialist Party (“PA.SO.K.”) –which was a big deal for the Greek post-dictatorship society–, a first wave of squats came to light. Three empty public buildings were occupied in Athens and two in Thessaloniki (the second largest city in the country). However, these squats only lasted a few weeks, mainly due to lack of any previous experiences. State oppression caused frustration to those who might have maintained high expectations for

a tolerant socialist government. Therefore the whole squatting activity was “postponed” for some years.

1985-1988: The second “wave”

As years pass by, a new political subject emerged in the streets of Greece, playing an important role in events of great political importance (antifascist demonstrations, reclaiming urban space through collective action, etc). A mixture of anarchists, anti-authoritarians, autonomists and libertarian communists seemed to constitute a movement of social antagonism, which tried to move beyond the boundaries of the traditional Left. Through non-hierarchical, horizontal general assemblies and an anti-institutional/anti-systemic political stance, this social movement differentiated from the vertical strict structures of the socialist and communist parties. This social movement rejected the orthodox culture of political organizations where self-determination is restricted, and showed a preference for diffused networks where people act according to their desires. This new subjectivity seemed to prefer the occupation of empty buildings –where activists can share their everyday life and take political initiatives freely– than the creation of formal political offices, where organization may eventually lead to power concentration.

So, in 1985, a second wave of squats emerged in Athens and Thessaloniki. This new wave of squatters attempted to avoid mistakes of the past and indeed some of them managed to keep their places occupied for years. It is characteristic that the oldest squat in Greece can be considered as a part of this second wave. Beginning in April 1988, “Lelas Karagianni” is already over 27 years old and still very active in social struggles.

1989-1990: “The hot winter of squats”

However, the “big bang” took place in 1989. The period from the last months of 1989 until the first months of 1990 is known as “the hot winter of squats”. New squats that emerged both in Athens and Thessaloniki tried to co-operate with each other and to organize events together. “Villa Amalias” –an emblematic squat near the centre of Athens with great symbolic significance to the movements of social antagonism– was

part of this wave. Actually, “Villa Amalias” used to host numerous political and cultural events and used to be one of the most famous self-managed venues for punk-rock concerts in Europe and one of the basic factors for the expansion of the “do-it-yourself” counterculture in Greece.

Decentralization

Taking a close look at the map of the “hot winter of squats”, a slight decentralization of the squats can be noticed in both Athens and Thessaloniki. While squatters of the second “wave” had been occupying abandoned public buildings in the centre of the cities in order to keep in touch with the frequent collective actions that took place close to the administrative headquarters, the squatters of the “hot winter” moved from the city centres further out to the degraded urban areas, close to the Centre however. On one hand, this kind of slight decentralization could be interpreted as a consequence of the oppression/evacuation of the squats in the historical centre of these metropolises, meaning that, squatters were somehow forced to move somewhere where they would not be visible to the public sphere. On the other hand, it could be urged that this process was an effect of the emergence of a new political subject that considered politics as a daily activity in their neighbourhoods and not as a spectacular action where the authorities were resided. In other words, squatters somehow preferred to “spread”, since this kind of territorial decentralization implied a political decentralization.

At the edge of the Millennium: From latency to visibility

This political proposition seemed to spread like a virus in Greek society after the emergence of the Global Justice Movement (Seattle, 1999). Protests against globalization signaled the dynamic appearance of the movements of social antagonism in public sphere, after several years of underground, latent procedures that took place in the daily activities of several “rhizomes”, such as squats and rented self-managed places (which are called “stekia”, namely “hangouts”), or even occupied places inside the universities (which function as permanent autonomous spaces).

Political dimensions

In total, from 1981 to the end of the 20th century, only about thirty political squats emerged in Greece. But it must be noticed that all of them were/are radical projects that chose to operate out of and against the dominant institutional framework. Practically, this means that all these squats were/are illegal. None of them even tried to negotiate with the state or with municipal or academic authorities –who are usually the legal owners of the occupied buildings– consisting a specific political stance on the matter.

More specifically, when derelict public buildings are occupied and become open social centers, the aim seems to be to prove that the horizontal self-organization of the squatters works better than the vertical bureaucratic organization of the state. Squatters attempt to self-manage their needs and desires “here-and-now” in order to prove that the idea of self-organisation is feasible in practice. In other words, squats want to be “prefigurations” of the pursued generalized self-management of social relations.

Squats in Greece try to co-operate horizontally as a network, outside the mainstream political landscape. It is quite characteristic that all of them agree to some basic principles, such as the strictly anti-hierarchical, anti-commercial and anti-media stance. Practically, it means that every brand new squat, “hangout” or other similar project that operates under these principles (direct democracy, non-profit, against mass media) is considered a part of this loose network.

However, types of informal hierarchy can be noticed in the Squatting Movement and in movements of social antagonism in general. In practice, power relations are reproduced in the interior of these movements, in spite of their anti-authoritarian rhetoric. Somehow, it seems that such kinds of contradictions are inevitable in projects that are inspired by the so-called “prefigurative politics”, since economic and social discriminations (sexism, ageism etc) do exist, even if actors of social movements passionately reject them.

In each case, squats in Greece seem to contribute significantly to the formation of radical political identities and squatters claim that this is the real reason that the state and the mass media (re)produce the stereotypical conception of squats as “hotbeds of lawlessness”. This stereotype distorts the actual contribution of squats in Greek society



which is the strengthening of a radical way of “doing politics” from below. Squatters are portrayed as destructors of public property while, on the contrary, they restore abandoned public buildings (which otherwise would surely collapse) and turn them into open social centers. In the same way, they are represented as anti-social while, on the contrary, they often contribute remarkably to the preservation of social cohesion of entire neighborhoods. For example, the squat “Villa Amalias” was the most important obstacle to the expansion of fascist attacks in areas where lots of immigrants live and work.

Actually, these long-standing latent procedures that take place in the daily activities of the Squatting Movement seem to contribute to the gradual emergence of a new political subjectivity in public sphere. It could be urged that the Squatting Movement in Greece is proved to be an appropriate empirical field of research for a theory of collective action which highlights the importance of cultural dimension both concerning the formation of social movements as such, and their potential to modify the categories of perception and valuation of social life, thus contributing to crucial political and cultural transformations.