

Greece and the Insurrections to Come

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From December 6, when police murdered 15-year-old Alexandros Grigoropoulos in downtown Athens, to the time of this writing, Greece has seen unprecedented rioting. Anarchists and students, supported and often joined by significant swaths of the population, have clashed with police, destroyed corporate and government property, and occupied government buildings, trade union offices, and media outlets, not to mention the usual universities. By December 12, police had used over 4600 capsules of tear gas, and were seeking more from Israel and Germany—an ominous pair of nations, when it comes to repression.

What's going on in Greece? Is it simply a matter of disenfranchised youth protesting a discouraging job market, or is there something more afoot?

What's It All About?

The corporate media has ignored the banners decrying police brutality and unaccountable authority, seizing instead on the idea that the unrest is the result of widespread unemployment and poor economic prospects for young Greeks. Thus prompted, many people—including some radicals—have focused on these issues as well.

At such a distance, we are not equipped to speak on the causes of the riots or the motivations of the participants, but we know better than to trust the media. Some corporate outlets have gone so far as to announce—in language that might be less surprising in a magazine like *Rolling Thunder*—that the events in Greece may presage the second coming of the anti-globalization movement thought to be vanquished after September 11, 2001. Though this might be true, we should hesitate to let the corporate media provide us with our narrative, lest it prove to be a Trojan horse.

If the riots are not about Alexandros after all, are we to believe that—were the economy more stable—it would be acceptable to shoot down 15-year-olds? After all, police kill people all the time in the United States without anyone smashing a single store window over it. Is this simply because we have a lower unemployment rate?

Should we accept that the rage being vented in Greece is economic in origin, the implication is that it could be dispelled by economic solutions—and there are capitalist solutions for the crisis in no shorter supply than socialist ones. Perhaps the exploitation, misery, and unemployment currently rampant in Greece could be exported to some meeker nation, or else enough credit could be extended to the disaffected stone-throwers that they could come to identify as middle class themselves. These approaches have worked before; one might even argue that they have driven the process of capitalist globalization.

If Greece could somehow be transformed into Sweden—if every nation could be Sweden, without any having to be Nigeria—would it be OK to shoot teenagers then? They shoot anarchists in Sweden too, you know.

To the extent to which the resistance in Greece is simply an expression of frustration at dim financial prospects, then, it is possible that it can ultimately be defused or co-opted. But there are other forces at work here, which the corporate account de-emphasizes.

These riots are not coming out of nowhere. Masked anarchists setting fires and fighting the police have been common in Greece since before the turn of the century. In 1999, shortly before the Seattle WTO protests, there were major riots when Bill Clinton visited. At the time, the economy was livelier—and the socialists were in power, which seems to contradict the theory that the current unrest is simply a result of dissatisfaction with the conservative government.

Corporate media generally ignore anarchists, trivializing them with qualifiers such as “self-styled” when they refer to them at all. That corporate outlets have been forced to detail the anarchist involvement in these and other struggles in Greece attests to the depth and seriousness of anarchist activity. Leftists may attempt to portray the events in Greece as a general uprising of “the people,” and certainly countless “normal” people have participated, but it is clear even from this vantage point that anarchists started the rioting and have remained the most influential element within it.

We hypothesize that the rioting in Greece is not simply an inevitable result of economic recession, but a proactive radical initiative that speaks to the general public.

Though the rioting was provoked by the murder of Alexandros, it is only possible because of preexisting infrastructures and social currents—otherwise, such murders would catalyze uprisings in the US as well. Such an immediate and resolute response would not have occurred if anarchists in Greece had not developed a culture conducive to it. Thanks to a network of social centers, a deep-seated sense that neighborhoods such as the one in which Alexandros was killed are liberated zones off-limits to police, and a tradition of resistance extending back through generations, Greek anarchists feel entitled to their rage and capable of acting upon it. In recent years, a series of struggles against the prison system, the mistreatment of immigrants, and the privatization of schools have given innumerable young people experience in militant action. As soon as the text messages circulated announcing the police killing, Greek anarchists knew exactly how to respond, because they had done so time and again before.

The general public in Greece is already sympathetic to resistance movements, owing to the heritage of struggle against the US-supported dictatorship. In this regard, Greece is similar to Chile, another nation noted for the intensity of its street conflicts and class warfare. With the murder of Alexandros, anarchists finally had a narrative that was compelling to a great number of people. In another political context, liberals or other opportunists might have been able to exploit this tragedy to their own ends, but the Greek anarchists forestalled this possibility by immediately seizing the initiative and framing the terms of the conflict.

It's Not the Economy, Stupid

That is to say, it's always the economy. But it's not just the economic hardships accompanying times of recession—the resistance in Greece is also a revolt against the exploitation, alienation, and hierarchy inherent in the capitalist system, that set the stage for police to murder teenagers whether or not a significant percentage of the population is unemployed.

To repeat, if alienation and hierarchy were themselves sufficient to inspire effective resistance, we'd see a lot more of it in the United States. The decisive factor in Greece is not the economy, but the cumulative efforts that have built a vibrant anarchist movement. There is no shortcut around developing an analogous movement in the US if we want to be capable of similar responses to oppression and injustice. Militant actions, such as some of the solidarity actions that have occurred in the US thus far, can provide some experience and momentum, but the creation of enduring cultural spaces is probably more essential.

Anarchists in the United States face a much different context than their Greek colleagues. Greece is a peripheral participant in the European Union, while the US remains the epicenter of global capitalism, with a correspondingly more powerful repressive apparatus. The legal consequences of participating in confrontations with the police are potentially more severe in the US, at least in proportion to the support for arrestees. Much of the population is more conservative, and both radical and oppressed communities are more fragmented, owing to the tremendous numbers of people in prison and the transience enforced by the job market. There is little continuity in traditions of resistance—in most communities, the collective anarchist memory does not stretch back beyond a decade at the most. The events in Greece are inspiring, but US anarchists can probably learn more from the infrastructures behind them than from the superficial aspects of the clashes.

Likewise, radicals in the US can draw inspiration from Greek anarchists without forgetting what is worthwhile in local anarchist communities. Though Greek anarchists clearly excel at confrontation, this does not guarantee that they are equally equipped to contest internal hierarchies and forms of oppression. The capacity to work out conflicts and maintain horizontal distributions of power is as essential to the anarchist project as any kind of offense or defense. It would be unfortunate if a fascination with the Greeks led US anarchists to deprioritize discussions about consent, consensus-based decision-making, and privilege.

The Insurrections to Come?

The events of the past two weeks may help reframe the global context for struggle, as the Zapatista revolt did in 1994. The rioting in Greece is not the only major unrest in the world right now, but it is perhaps the most promising, because it is explicitly directed against hierarchical power.

Most current hostilities, even those not organized by governments, are not as promising. Not everyone who takes up arms outside the state's monopoly on violence is fighting for the abolition of hierarchy. Nationalist campaigns, fundamentalist crusades, religious conflicts, ethnic strife, and the gang warfare of illegal capitalism pit people against each other without any hope of liberation. We have to set visible precedents for liberation struggles if we hope future conflicts will pit the oppressed against their oppressors rather than against each other. Greece may be one such precedent. We can create similar precedents on smaller scales in the US, by taking the initiative to determine the character of confrontations with authority. The anarchist mobilization at last summer's Republican National Convention was arguably an example of this, though certainly not the only format for it.

Today, party communism is largely discredited, and most influential resistance movements do not see seizing state power as feasible or desirable. This leaves two roads for critics of the current world order. One is to support reformist heads of state such as Obama, Lula, and Chavez, who cash in on dissent to re-legitimize the state form and, as if incidentally, their own power. On the other hand, there is the possibility of a struggle against power itself—whether waged consciously, as it currently is in Greece, or as a result of complete social and economic marginalization, as in France in 2005. The latter path offers a long struggle with no victory in sight, but it may be the first step towards a new world.

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