The Greek Review of Social Research, special issue 136 C΄, 2011, 111-133

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COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES VERSUS SOCIAL EXCLUSION: THE DECEMBER 2008 GREEK YOUTH MOVEMENT

ABSTRACT

This article is trying to highlight some identity aspects of the Greek youth movement that seem to be appropriate in order to understand and interpret similar collective actions of excluded people against social exclusion. The core of the argument is that the notion of "collective identity" is more appropriate than others for our understanding of the complex interactions among different and heterogeneous youth groups that participated actively in the December 2008 riots. In our case, it is precisely the emergence of creative symbolic and physical interactions during rioting, that should be considered as the main factor in the construction of a collective identity that led to the rise of a youth movement in Greece.

Key words: *youth movement, social exclusion, collective identity, protest*

> "P: Why? Because I was in black that day … Because I was in black every day?! I wasn't in the mood to wear anything else, because that was expressing me …
> Th.: That was it … because you were mourning; we weren't mourning solely for Alexandros. Do you know what we were mourning for above all? We were mourning for our seventeen years which have been eaten up one by one by a shitty educational system, a shitty social system, by an everyday brainwash … Yeah! We are mourning, you see … we are mourning for the twenty-year olds, the thirty-year olds who are interested only in fucking up and getting a job. This …"
> (This excerpt is taken from a discussion in a focus group of a research on high school students who participated in the December events).

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INTRODUCTION

An approach to social exclusion that focuses on the excluded themselves should practically connect exclusion with the lived experience of it. A fundamental pre-condition for this connection is to introduce into the analysis the social action of people. Indeed, in order to face not only the external "objective" factors of the exclusion (lack of material or symbolic resources) but also the most dynamic factors of it, we have to take into account the ways subjects comprehend and respond to social inequalities. In other words, the social relationships of every day life that produce and reproduce inequalities between social actors are sometimes profoundly contested by the "victims" of these inequalities. In this sense, socially excluded people may move from passive participation in the social relationships producing their own exclusion to active participation in social relationships contesting this exclusion. The above often implies radical forms of collective actions of the excluded people against their social opponents. Our aim is to analyze the cycle of mobilisations by different groups of socially excluded people, and to signify them as collective actions that attempt to alter the landscape of power relations within the society. These actions challenge openly the wider social processes of allocation and reproduction of inequalities.

More specifically, we will start with the following theoretical assumptions: First, we can define exclusion as a continuous and dynamically developing *social process of personal and collective degradation* and marginalisation. Second, there is *spiral dynamics of exclusion* that reproduces (often to an extended degree) the whole social degradation of the individual and his/her relations. In other words, the different forms of exclusion are connected with each other in such a way so that individuals can both get "transferred" from one form of exclusion to another and incorporate interwoven or accumulated forms of exclusion in a unified frame of life. Third, there are *fields of experience that connect "preferentially" specific social groups with exclusion*. In our case, they are fields – such as family, educational process, workplace and political participation – that are all connected with a basic feature of excluded subjects: age. Finally, as mentioned above, we can analyze *exclusion in direct relation to collective social actions*; that is, we consider that, apart from the analysis of exclusion processes (negative dimension), there is also the analysis of collective actions (positive dimension) that excluded social groups sometimes develop in order to break away from their exclusion.

For the purpose of the present paper, we assume that the very phenomenon of social exclusion may be connected only to specific excluded social

groups, certainly not to all socially "vulnerable groups". The criterion for this connection is not so much a social vulnerability related to income lack, educational anxiety, professional insecurity, and so on, but rather the very weakness of the excluded people to frame collectively their deprivations as constantly reproduced by established social inequalities. This weakness is then implicated in social conflicts, reproducing the outcomes of social inequalities that the members of these groups suffer from. In other words, socially excluded groups that lack capacity to frame their field of social interactions, are not able to see why and how they are excluded, who their social opponents are, and how they have to react to them. In short, they lack collective skills of critical importance. On the contrary, these skills may be acquired through a collective identity producing the absolutely necessary tools for collective action. As we will see later, these tools include cognitive definitions, active relationships between members of the group, and an emotional investment of action (Melucci, 1996: 70-71).

As a matter of fact, we connect the revolt of the December 2008 Greek Youth Movement with the issue of social inequalities because we assume that the revolted youth – during the cycle of their mobilisations – succeeded, to a certain degree, in forming a wider common collective identity, despite and beyond important existing differences among their various groups. Let us see how.

After Alexis Grigoropoulos was murdered by a special guard's gunfire on 6 December 2008, there was all over Greece an "explosion of subjectivity" of the youth, challenging some of the institutional "pillars" of society, such as the political system, state repression mechanisms (including the doctrine of the state's monopoly on legitimate use of physical force), the educational system, the institution of family and the mass media. At the same time, whereas, on the one hand, there was a wide range of social actions of the civil society, on the other hand, there were multi-faceted reactions from different social factors, such as a mechanistic reaction of political institutions themselves, the "mediating" discourse of mass media and, naturally, the "organic intellectuals" that defended state legality.

Therefore, our purpose is to focus on the grassroots creativity of youth interactions during the demonstrations, and show that the collective actions produced were an outcome to be thoroughly examined rather than viewed as a product that was totally and automatically shaped by "external objective factors" – such as economic crisis, unemployment, human rights violations, and so on. Furthermore, "internal subjective resources" – such as solidarity, ethical commitment, sharing sentiments, cultural codes and

values, and being part of a common identity – have not been treated at all as elements to be seriously examined in most analyses of those protests. In contrast, we do believe that the prolific collective actions the Greek youth movement unfolded during those days were founded on a strong sense of collective identity formed precisely during those actions by creative and meaningful interactions among different groups of revolted young people. If we take into consideration Melucci's comment (Melucci, 2000: 72) that "the excluded generally lack material resources, but even more they lack their ability to be persons, that is, autonomous subjects of their own action", then the December 2008 Greek Youth Movement gave the excluded youth the ability to be "persons" and assume fully the responsibility of their actions.

We will try to identify succinctly and analyse the main features of the youth movement under examination in order to illustrate crucial aspects of collective actions that took place during the revolt. Of course, this effort would not be a detailed record of the events; it would be rather an effort to understand what we can learn from those events. The analytical methodology of the article is based on sources that allowed us to examine closely the youth's protests from their very inception. The sources of our analysis of the protests of those days are primarily newspaper reportage, NGOs' reports, magazine articles, participants' blogs, informative websites, and participant observation of events.

ASPECTS OF THE DECEMBER 2008 GREEK YOUTH MOVEMENT

Since the evening of 6 December 2008 up to, at least, the middle of January 2009, Greece experienced, from one end to the other, the most intense and unique phenomena of mass protests. Nevertheless, it is true that in Greece similar phenomena of mass protest and riots are not rare. One such example is the mass student mobilisations that took place in the winter of 2007 for the defence of Article 16 of the Hellenic Constitution that provides for the public and free from tuition character of universities in Greece and against the government's Higher Education Bill. What new features did therefore the wave of the December protest bring into the Greek political limelight? At first glance, it is discernible that the protests and conflicts that broke out among protesters and the riot police have been unprecedented not only in the modern political history of the country but also in that of the entire Europe. This is true both in terms of mass scale

and frequency of occurrence of the events, of their intensity, their total duration, the social heterogeneity of the groups that took part in them, and in terms of the rich repertory of action and forms of communication that were developed. In short, for about one and a half months, different forms of protest with quite new features took place.

Succinctly, we could consider that, in terms of protest form, the movement that was developed does correspond to Wilson's observation that "social movements employ methods of persuasion and coercion which are, more often that not, novel, unorthodox, dramatic, and of questionable legitimacy" (quoted in Della Porta and Diani, 2006: 165). Nevertheless, let us attempt to summarize the features of the December 2008 Greek youth movement, by analysing them through six specific aspects of collective action.

First aspect: Massive actions

The first aspect is *the massive scale of mobilisations*. The precise number of participants in the protests is very difficult to estimate. However, tens of thousands of individuals – in one way or another – took an active part in disturbances and riots, thus making – in combination with the duration of the mobilisations – the "logic of numbers" (Della Porta and Diani, 2006: 171-173) lend an impressive picture to those protests. The street fightings that began on the night of 6 December 2008, initially with the participation of several hundreds of individuals in the centre of Athens, developed rapidly, the next month and a half, into marches, violent demonstrations and intense clashes between thousands of individuals and the police not only all over the country but also abroad. Indeed, the first reactions to Alexis' murder occurred on the evening of Saturday 6 December and the day after, on Sunday 7 December. The participation in those protests was understandably small if we take into consideration that first, those protests occurred immediately after Alexis' murder, and second, schools were closed during the weekend. Nevertheless, from Monday 8 December, the situation changed. The streets of Greek cities and towns were filled with multiple and angry crowds and large parts of these were junior high and high school students.

For sure, there were quite a few centralized, massive, disciplined and voluminous protests similar to those of previous decades, with coordinated and disciplined participation of many thousands of people. The spontaneity that characterised individual participation in that movement

also determined each time the decentralized form of the clashes and the varied size of protests. Since the first days of mobilisations, newspapers (in printed and electronic form) and TV news broadcasts reported militant or violent demonstrations in which, depending on the case, the number of participants varied from some tens to some hundreds or even some thousands. Usually, the size of participation was each time adapted to age-related, social and ideological features of the group or groups that were mobilised and to how mobilisations and collaboration between organizations and groups were co-ordinated. Thus, less massive events – but more militant – were those that were organized by groups of anarchists and antiauthoritarians, while the most massive events seemed to have been those that were organized by students, as well as those that were of a "peaceful" traditional character, such as the "educational rallies". Should we adopt Tarrow's three major aspects of the repertoire of action in modern movements (Tarrow, 1999: 91-104), we can claim that, as far as the correlation between the volume and the form of expression of collective actions is concerned, *violence* was observed in the least massive cases (mainly with the participation of anarchists, antiauthoritarians and immigrants); *disruption* in the medium massive cases (mainly with the participation of high school and university students); and *conventional protest* in the most massive events (with the participation mainly of high school, junior high school and university students as well as of middle-aged people, that is, parents, teachers and trade-unionists). Nevertheless, this finding is only valid "in general terms", in the sense that it identifies a relaxed rule of "selective affinity" between reference groups and forms of action, but it does not make any absolute correlation. Indeed, sometimes this rule was broken mainly by high school students from all over the country taking aggressive and violent actions.

Second aspect: Complexity and heterogeneity

The second aspect pertains to a feature of action that is of the utmost importance, namely the unprecedented for the Greek society *social complexity and heterogeneity of groups* that protested in public spaces. As pointed out earlier, in the past few years the political history of Greek society has recorded massive and dynamic protests such as the demonstrations against the American President Clinton's visit in Athens in September 1999, and the frequent mobilisations against the government's statement of intent to revoke the public character of Higher Education during the winter of

2007. In the above cases, however, the social composition of participants, or rather the social and political status under which the protesters participated was quite simple: in the former case, participation was driven clearly by political and ideological motives and was related to party or other organizational forms of action. In the latter case, participation was more spontaneous (than in the first case), being, however, restricted almost exclusively to university students.

On the contrary, in the case of December 2008, different groups of young people seemed to have achieved – relying on mutual recognition – a common framework for action and a cohesive collective identity. Thus, the following distinct excluded groups were identified: high school and junior high school students, university students, marginalized social groups (mainly unemployed, immigrants, precarious workers, and Roma people) and groups of anarchists and antiauthoritarians. All those groups of young people appeared dynamically and almost simultaneously,[1] and they all showed high reflexes of social reaction to the happenings. When the revolt started, the most important common characteristic of all those heterogeneous groups – from the point of view of class and social status – was the age-related factor. In fact, the participation of individuals who were roughly above thirty years of age was comparatively limited, and was usually presented as purely supportive "political contribution" to the social reaction that the young people had been expressing. During the weeks of the revolt, a multifaceted and complex collective subject was being made up with a cohesive collective identity which bridged together different dominant forms of social exclusion. These usually refer to time poverty and lack of social visibility for high school and junior high school students, cultural and professional disorientation for university students, deprivation, unemployment, precarious labor, cultural exclusion and lack of social rights for the marginalized social groups, and political exclusion for anarchists and

1. During the first hours, the mobilisations were organized by militant groups of young anarchists and antiauthoritarians who – after they started from Exarchia, the Law School and the Technical University of Athens (which had already been sat in by students) – were dispersed to other sites in the centre of Athens, being supported by marginalized young people. The following day the clashes were extended all over Greece, while from Monday, 8 December (2008) – the day the schools opened (following the weekend) – the militant school mobilisations started. Groups of young immigrants and Roma people made their presence felt and dynamic on Tuesday, 9 December, and the latter started attacking and besieging the police station of Zafyriou district. As Sotiris stresses (2010: 207): "for the first time it was not just the student movement but the whole *youth movement* that dominated the social scene".

antiauthoritarians. Upon the emergence of this collective subject, the revolt itself became the common denominator of all participants, and claimed for its members social visibility and recognition.

The young people that participated in the "December movement" regarded themselves as members of a social group whose cohesion was based on excluded needs, aims and a common opponent, something that they had never experienced before in recent history. During the events, they got to know each other as they had never done before - individuals of a generation that belong to different and mainly isolated young groups. It seems that, in a way, at the level of expression, the high school group offered an "alibi" (i.e., an opportunity for action) to the rest of the groups and, more specifically, to the stigmatized groups (such as the unemployed, immigrants, and Roma). If we take into consideration the claim that "the social movements of stigmatized groups place the identity dimension in the centre of their concerns" (Mathieu, 2004: 141), then we should consider that – during the mobilisations of the high school and university students, on the one hand, and those of the marginalized young people, on the other hand – there was mutual recognition because of an intense and dense communication among the various groups of protesters. In other words, whereas, on the one hand, both the high school and university students gave the opportunity for action to most marginalized young people, on the other hand, the former got identity traits from the latter, so that they could all share communication codes and forms of sociability as mobilisation resources.

Now, if we employ in our analysis the earlier mentioned framework that Melucci uses for collective identity (Melucci, 1996: 70-71), we shall see that in the case of "Greek December" the young rebels developed both a strong sense of belonging to a group. The essential components for the identity formation were: At first, the *collectively shaped cognitive tools and common potentials for giving meaning* to ends, means and field of action, which, in relation to the prospect of participation in the collective action, changed radically the pre-existing conventional cost/profit calculation. The young people got motivated to act, perceiving their surrounding world in the same way as well as recognizing common opponents within the institutional political system (i.e., mainly the government), the repression mechanisms of the State (i.e., police and courts), education, the market system, even within the family institution itself. In relation to the above, it is no accident that all coordinated and agonizing efforts of the most institutional political system (including the Communist Party of Greece) and mainstream mass media to distinguish politically and "ontologically" be-

tween "violent" and "peaceful" mobilisations and between "student" and "hooded" protesters fell flat.

Secondly, *active relationships* were established within the movement – where the young people took advantage of all possible organizational forms that were available to them (political and ideological organizations, local communities, school communities, spontaneous companionship, student assemblies etc.) – and an enormous, exceptionally dense and multifaceted communication network was developed. Thus, the young people managed to create communication networks that went beyond the limits of individual groups and to restore procedures for their in-between communication, interaction and reciprocal influence. For the first time, so many and so different young people approached each other physically and symbolically. Simultaneously, for the first time different repertoires of mobilisation were spontaneously combined to form a common collective action. At first glance, those repertoires seemed "non-homogeneous": stones and flowers, complaints and threats, utopian and instrumental demands, political and "a-political" slogans, peaceful sit-ins and sieges of police stations, reformist and anti-systemic aims, autonomous and non-autonomous actions, identity and materialistic goals; that is, there was an anti-institutional orientation of the action together with the effort to influence institutions. In short, it was "structural ambiguity of the collective action" (Melucci, 1983: 161) that was fully articulated and developed.

Finally, the young people made a strong *emotional investment in the action*. In fact, this was the parameter of the collective identity that was pointed out and over-stressed both by the mass media and the "organic" intellectuals of political institutions ("fear", "wrath of the young", "desperation", "hopelessness", "anger" etc.). Emotion in a movement is certainly important because, on the one hand, it relativizes the negative effect of participants' inevitable cognitive shortcomings. On the other hand, it produces a high degree of solidarity that collective action requires. In reality, nevertheless, sentiment itself cannot be the cause of a movement, as it was presented. On the contrary, the movement was shaped entirely by the form of cognitive tools the mobilised people used, to give meaning to their own ends, means and fields of action, as mentioned earlier.

The fine line that divides immoral from unacceptable in our lives delineates simultaneously the difference between blind anger and collective explosion. When someone crosses it, s/he unavoidably passes the threshold that separates the emotional world of everyday life from that of social movement. When the subjects' prior perception of the system as immoral

– (corrupt and clientelist politics,[2] privatized "public" education,[3] a labour market with no meritocracy, complete individualization and role specialization in the family, commercialized social relationships and so on) – is combined with the certainty that henceforth this system is unacceptable, then the subject's perception of reality makes the collective movement an essential component of this very reality. However, the sentiment is born out of a new awareness (i.e., it is the product of new knowledge) that what is challenged at a moral level can (at last!) be treated as not acceptable. Thus, whatever up to that day had been underground and unarticulated was getting henceforth public and articulated. Whatever had been living in the realm of the "unreal" (yet a daily reality) emerged into public view. In few words, the movement identity was proven to be the most suitable intellectual, emotional and relational springboard for action to the young people who recognized themselves in it.

Of course, neither the common action eliminated the particular social features of each group, nor the common collective identity removed the individual cultural identities of participating groups. Even within the same group important differences were observed. For example, it is known that in Athens there are income and social differences among high school students, depending on whether they come from the privileged northern suburbs or the downgraded western suburbs. Nevertheless, such differences prevented neither common mobilisations from taking place nor high school students studying in very expensive private schools from participating in those mobilisations (Liofagos et al., 2009). Multiplicity (Gavriilidis, 2009) and radical heterogeneity (Tsalikoglou, 2009) became decisive features of the young people's revolt, inseparable from the forms of action and the ways of protest expression. It was observed that dividing lines of the past were blurred during common action. Class differences were put aside when the common opponent had to be confronted. The very participation of the second generation of immigrants in the revolt signalled the enfeeblement of ethnic and class distinctions and the multifacetedness of action, with the support of wider parts of society (Maniatis, 2008).[4]

2. In addition to the more general picture of the clientelistic political system in Greece and just a few weeks before agitations started, scandals about the briberies of political parties and politicians – such as the scandal of the Monastery of Vatopaidi (on Mount Ahtos) and that of German multinational company "Siemens" – had broken out and had shaken the Greek public opinion.

3. According to 2007 research data of the Greek General Confederation of Labour, Greek families spent about 4.4 billion Euros annually in all kinds of "educational services" (mainly in private tuition centres) for their children (www.in.gr/news/article.asp?lngEntityID=786651).

4. That was also the element that scared the Communist Party of Greece the most and not

In this respect, the Greek revolt of December featured a protest movement whose main characteristics correspond completely to Melucci's theoretical conception that views social movements as "multidimensional realities", or "multi-polar systems of action", in which individuals could participate as such without being necessary for their participation to be "legitimized" beforehand by a group or an organization. Thus, in our case the social movement appeared not as an absolutely unified empirical object, but rather as a notional continuum, whose networked and relaxed form of cohesion did allow different excluded subjects to act jointly and in mutual recognition,[5] either belonging to groups and organizations, or not (Diani and Bison, 2004: 284).

Third aspect: Decentralization

The third aspect of action concerns the *propensity for decentralization* that characterized the December mobilisations. The movement acquired an unprecedented geographical range. Beginning from the centre of Athens, the mobilisations expanded globally very soon, and in a few days they attracted the attention of the whole world. From a geographic point of view and within the recent Greek historical context, original qualitative features of the movement action emerged in "avalanche" – like mobilisations, covering neither only the big cities nor simply the centres of the big cities. In fact, a novel element of these mobilisations was that in Athens – although the traditional demonstrations were not absent in the city centre – their greatest part took place in *districts* and *neighbourhoods* remote from the administrative and symbolic centre that is located between Syntagma Square and Omonoia Square. Thus, a lot of districts in the Greek capital lived unprecedented for their history riots and clashes.

Apparently, two elements played a great role in that event. One is the intense involvement of the high and junior high school student population

simply its weakness to control the mobilisations. For the orthodox Communists, the greatest problem was how they could manage ideologically the phenomenon of common action forwarded by heterogeneous social groups, with different incomes, class and cultural features. And, of course, they chose the easy way-out by denouncing and stigmatizing a great part of the mobilisations.

5. According to Kalyvas: "The protests were less homogeneous, less ethnocentric, more hybrid and mixed than any other in the past, even cosmopolitan at moments, posing a challenge to the hegemonic ethnocentric concept of citizenship and the ultimate primacy of the national subject as the exclusive bearer of political rights. The insurrection opened up Greek politics to the problem of its exclusions" (Kalyvas, 2010: 359).

which was dispersed in each neighbourhood and district of the country. Having the local schools as the base of their operations, the students could organize their mobilisations[6] without being necessary (with the exception only of fully educational rallies and sit-downs in front of the Police Headquarters in Athens) to move to the centre of Athens. The other element is related to the identification of the opponent *per se*. It is true that during the events several opponents were identified by the movement with greater or less recognisability in the geographical space: the government, the state mechanisms, the institutional political apparatuses, etc. However, none of these targets had such a great physical and symbolic recognisability as the main opponent –literally an enemy– of the youth movement and especially of the students did: the police, in which the two perpetrators of their schoolmate's assassination were still in service. The prehistory of police violence in the years after the fall of dictatorship, from 1974 until today, and the frequent exoneration of the police officers accused[7] of unjustifiable assaults, intensified the young people's rage. Being situated, of course, in the entire geographic space of neighbourhoods, police stations became the main target of attacks the students launched in the wider area of Athens. The greater physical presence of the police contributed to the decentralization of the movement action.

Besides, such a decentralization of mobilisations was evidenced in a *great number of urban centres* in which the protests took place. Never before in recent Greek history had a movement been so visible and noticeable in so many cities and towns alike, in Greece. As a rule, when cities other than Athens get involved in protests, these are, at most, Thessaloniki, Heraklion and Patras. In our case, however, there was a synchronized re-

6. "In a large number of junior high schools and high schools the students simply went in and out, blocked the streets in their neighbourhood, threw stones at the police stations, went back to school breathless and het-up only to leave in a while" (www.alfavita.gr/typos/typos12_12_08_938.php). According to Association of Secondary Education Teachers data, on 15 December (2008) 600 schools were sat in (www.ekathimerini.com/4dcgi/_w_articles_politics_100002 _16/12/2008_103063).

7. In the last 20 years alone, there have been tens of cases of Greek citizens who were murdered by police officers and their cases have not been tried due to the fact that they were statute-barred or, if they had been tried, they usually ended up being buyable sentences (see Kontoaggellou 2009). However, the cases of impunity for cold-blood murders of immigrants have outnumbered the previous ones in the last decade. From April 1998 to October 2009, fifty immigrants lost their lives to "accidental firing" or under "unclear conditions of arrest and detention"; never has anybody been convicted for these (www.athens.indymedia.org/front.php3?lang=el&article_id=1090715).

volt at a national scale that embraced even towns which, up to that day, had never experienced riots and clashes of such a scale and duration at all! For a few weeks, in cities and towns all over Greece, even in those traditionally more conservative from a political point of view, thousands of young people convened assemblies, attacked police stations, closed streets, broke facades of banks, dyed ATMs, wrote inventive slogans on the walls, attacked police stations and clashed with riot police, made sit-down protests, disrupted traffic in main streets, and did sit-ins in: schools, universities, public buildings, working centres, town halls and prefectures, commercial chambers, offices of law associations, television and radio stations. They also organized discussions and various happenings, interrupted theatrical performances and film presentations, formed open assemblies, hang up protest banners in the Acropolis, disrupted the programme of the public television, and came out "live on air". More than thirty cities and towns experienced intensely the agitations of those days.

Regarding the geographic decentralization of the protests, the revolt spread very fast beyond the Greek borders. A few days after Alexis was murdered, lots of mobilisations in a lot of cities worldwide showed that the movement had assumed a *transnational dynamic*. Thousands of young people, mainly in Europe, North America and Australia, watched in real time through the Internet the various protests in Greece, communicated with Greek young people of their own age and participated in very dynamic marches and support demonstrations. Urban centres in many countries experienced rallies and agitations that showed that there was a worldwide wave of solidarity for the Greek protesters. In certain countries, the dominant political class (especially in France) were seriously puzzled and worried that there might be a spread of the violent episodes and a transnational generalization of the revolt from Greece to other countries. The President of France himself, Nicolas Sarkozy, invoked the fear of episodes and social reactions similar to those in Greece to turn down proposals made by Members of Parliament of his party whereby his government's budget should give additional privileges to high income strata of France.[8]

Finally, the decentralization of revolt occurred not only in the geographical but also in the *social space*. An enormous effort was made to construct open social spaces of interaction among the people that were mobilised, with a proportional affluence of spontaneous "horizontal activities". Such horizontal spaces facilitated the interconnectedness and coordination of

8. See http://www.in.gr/news/article.asp?IngEntity ID=967149&? IngDtrID=244.

multiple actions, and functioned literally as catalysts so that the heterogeneity and multifacetedness of actors would actually produce viable and highly conflicting dynamics within the protests. There were creative initiatives that either formed *ex nihilo* these horizontal spaces of interaction or gave new dynamics and content to the revolt in the already existing local groups of action.

The basic difference between such spaces and similar initiatives of the recent past was –apart from the degree of massiveness and conflictuality– precisely the fact that now the subjects expressed themselves, spoke to and recognised each other; they didn't simply "manage" opportunities that offered small and self-referential activist collectivities mainly within the university context. In the intensity of everyday life, they linked the local and personal issues with the general political ones; they built collective reference spaces in order to connect private concerns with public interests. Their personal biographies became the basis upon which mutual recognition and group practices were built. Collectivities of this kind dispersed in social space were basically: (a) the continuous open assemblies of citizens mainly in districts and neighbourhoods, out of metropolitan centres and towns; (b) the tens of "thematic" sit-ins of cultural centres, municipal buildings, law associations, labour centres, cinemas and theatres, radio stations; and (c) the coordinating committees of the high school students who undertook the task to inform high school students and coordinate their mobilisations. An important experimental parameter of the decentralization of the revolt in social space was that a public sphere was generated where hierarchies and personal dependencies were broken down (Virno, 2005: 29-30; Virno, 2006: 37-40). That is, the criterion of equality was tested practically through the construction of frames of non-mediated and non-hierarchical communication, interaction and co-decision, whose goal was to ensure that there was both group pluralism and autonomy of personal choices within the movement.

Fourth aspect: Duration and viability

The fourth aspect concerns *the durative and viable conflictuality* of the December mobilisations. We have already mentioned that riots began on 6 December 2008 and went on at least up to the middle of the following month, whereas they seemed to have influenced other forms of protest that took place a little after the 'hard' time core of the events.[9] The "Time" pa-

9. I am mainly referring to local actions such as the militant protest of the residents of

rameter is important because, as Alinsky suggests (reproduced in Goodwin and Jasper, 2008: 226): "A tactic that drags on too long becomes a drag. Man can sustain militant interest in any issue for only a limited time, after which it becomes a ritualistic commitment, like going to church on Sunday mornings". The fact that protests of massive and highly conflictual dynamics were maintained for about one and a half months shows precisely how long it took for the revolt to transform into a ritualistic commitment. Protests stopped during Christmas holidays and began immediately afterwards commencing with the vigorous march of 9 January 2009 in which 3,000 protesters participated.[10]

The viability of the clashes, however, should be dealt with the serious consequences of another very critical incident. On 5 January 2009 – precisely one month after the mobilisations had started – a police guard was seriously wounded during an attack by a terrorist group armed with automatic weapons and grenades, against the police guards of the Ministry of Culture.[11] As expected,[12] the incident resulted in a series of intense political and psychological pressures that were put on the movement by the mass media, intellectuals and the biggest part of the institutional political

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Kypseli (a district in the centre of Athens) against cutting trees so that a parking may be built by the Municipality of Athens at the end of January (2009) and the clashes between 2.000 farmers from Crete and the police in the harbour of Piraeus at the beginning of February (2009). Furthermore, we could also claim that certain judicial decisions – such as those taken by the Supreme Administrative Court on provisional pause of the construction of a commercial centre in the Botanic area (near the centre of Athens) on 19/1/2009, after 131 residents of the area had appealed to justice – were influenced by the wider dynamics developed during the December revolt (www.in.gr/sports/article.asp?lng DtrID=1101&? lngEntityID=977262).

10. See www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeq5jdMW5f6 HMm4S7 LS0tW-Z1JC14K13W.

11. Nine days later, the terrorist group known as "Revolutionary Struggle" claimed responsibility for the attack, describing it as "an armed response to State terrorism", as a "response to Alexis Grigoropoulos' assassination" (newspaper *To Pontiki*, 15/1/2009).

12. It is "expected" in the sense that movements provide the means for naming public problems, which reveals the immediacy and the highly meaningful investment and commitment of the collective experience from a moral point of view – things that sound at least weird (if not hostile) to mainstream journalistic practices (see, Psimitis, 2006; Psimitis, 2007). In general, influential media tend to trivialize social movements by highlighting the violent acts while downplaying both the social criticism that these movements exert and the political content of their proposals (Rauch et al., 2007). In our case, this terrorist act meant to change the attitude of even the friendliest towards the protesters media, in the sense that, after the terrorist attack, their usual attitude to draw a careful distinction between "legitimate" and "extremist" protest (Rosie and Gorringe, 2009: 47) was intensified and exacerbated, too.

system. The known tactics of the political and ideological identification of the movement members with the perpetrators of the terrorist act was being tested fulsomely the following days. At the same time, some of the mass media showed a change of attitude towards the movement, shifting from their initial sympathy with the "kids" towards reservation and hostility, due to the fact that the events had taken "another turn". Thus, the fact that, after the attack had taken place, the mobilisations went on – even with a smaller participation but with stronger conflictual force – proved the political and ideological resilience of the December revolt and the degree of viability of the clashes that had brought to the movement.

Fifth aspect: An age-related conflictuality

The *age-related and conflictual features of the movement* are the fifth aspect of the December action. As Serdedakis rightly observed (2009), Piven and Cloward had, early on, expressed the opinion that breaking the rules is the unique resource that is available to the movements of those being socially excluded. This observation leads us to a complex theoretical contradiction: what is considered by a lot of researchers (mainly of the Anglo-Saxon tradition) as the critical feature of modern social movements, that is, negotiability of goals (see especially Meyer, 2007). Other researchers denote, at least in identity-oriented movements, a roughly prohibiting condition for collective actions. Once again, Melucci reminds us in one of his fundamental hypotheses that: "A social movement is a collective action that expresses a conflict and involves the breach of the limits of compatibility of the system under examination" (Melucci, 1984: 4). Obviously, for a collective action to move out of the limits of compatibility of the system, it means that it breaks the rules of the game, proposes non-negotiable objectives, and challenges the legitimacy of power. In this sense, the December movement – acting broadly out of the limits of the system – decreased dramatically the negotiability of its objectives, since its two main slogans were: "the government has to go" and "the riot police should be disarmed".

This out-of-the-system action appeared at the level of practical activities. In fact, the influence that the December protest exerted on the Greek society was also related to: (1) the breaking of conventional rules of confrontation between the protesters and police forces; and, (2) the active participation of a lot of young people and under-age individuals in this very breaking. The protesters' clashes with the police all over the country took

the form of a daily open confrontation, mainly with tens of students' massive attacks on police stations. Hard street fighting and daily sieges of police stations in the entire country showed the conflictual dynamics of the movement which, while advancing, "burned bridges behind it" so that there would be no retreat; it destroyed completely the possibility of tactical, even *in extremis*, manoeuvres.

Furthermore, concerning the issue of "the logic of bearing witness" (according to Della Porta and Diani, 2006: 176-178), the information we have is also in line with the findings on the high conflictual practice of the movement, which involved the wide undertaking of personal risk and cost on the part of participants. According to the International Amnesty Report based on data provided by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Public Order,[13] the official number of arrested protesters between 6 December 2008 and 14 January 2009 in 16 different Greek cities and towns was at least 284 Greeks and foreigners, despite the fact that the riot police had received official orders from the Minister of Public Order to use "soft tactics". Between 6 and 17 December 2008 alone, 130 foreigners were arrested,[14] a good number of whom were deported, while 67 of the arrested individuals were detained up to the trial. The number of under-age individuals arrested (Athens is not included in these statistics) amounted to at least 60,[15] while in Larissa a good number of under-age individuals faced indictment under already existing counterterrorist law! Lots of individuals involved in protests were also wounded and in most cases they preferred either not to get hospitalized at all or to get hospitalized without revealing the actual circumstances under which they were wounded.

The same conflictual dynamics were also observed at the level of "the logic of material damage" (Della Porta and Diani, 2006: 173-176). According to the Chamber of Commerce and Industry estimation, in Athens 435 shops (banks, supermarkets, big shops and chains, medium- and small-sized shops, theatres and cinemas) suffered damages and thefts of merchandises, the total cost of which amounted to 50 million Euros. The National Confederation of Trade estimated that about 565 shops were damaged, the total cost of which amounted to about 200 million Euros. Respec-

13. See www.amnesty.org.gr/library /reports/2009/police _ violence.htm.

14. The Report ascertains a discrimination practice. In fact, the number of arrested foreigners during the demonstrations and riots was disproportionate to the overall composition of the crowd that made up the demonstrations or riots (ibid.).

15. See www.wombles.org.uk (accessed 6 September 2009).

tively, in Thessaloniki the local Trade Association reported that 88 shops had been damaged.[16]

Sixth aspect: Communication challenge

The sixth and last aspect is related to *the communication events* of December. Taken by surprise, the journalists of a TV station reported that: "The high and junior high school students in a coordinated move, via SMS and the Internet, abandoned their schools in groups and within less than an hour there had been tens of marches, along with sieges of police stations and public buildings".[17] In fact, during the revolt the effective use of electronic means of communication for intercommunication, co-ordination and the organization of mobilisations, became clear. This allowed great speed and an unexpected geographical dispersion of militant actions. However, this was not the only outcome. The positive outcomes of the movement's communication practices were not restricted in organizing the mobilisations. These new practices highlighted the relation between the quality of produced information and the form of the attempted dialogue, which is usually developed in socially dynamic and communicatively complex environments such as those of movements.

According to Sennett, the more the information volume increases, the more the external control over the information is centralized. Consequently, the political role of communication is to decrease the information volume, and people attain that as long as they collaborate and interpret, that is, they decentralize communication (Sennett, 2008: 174). Along the same lines, Christopher Lasch observes that in a genuinely democratic process the stereotypical relation between information and dialogue is reversed, in the sense that the latter becomes the pre-condition for the former. Democracy requires a vigorous public dialogue within the frame in which information is produced. Democracy does need information, nevertheless the type of information that it needs can be born only by the dialogue (Lasch, 1995).

In our case, it seems that, with the aid of the Internet, the movement achieved to conduct an information war (armed with: Twitter, Athens.indymedia, Indy.gr, Flickr, Delicious, Friendfeed, You Tube, Facebook, Blogs and Wikimedia), to shape grassroots forms of public communication, which were proven decisive in generating the revolt, since the movement

16. See www.in.gr/news/article.asp?IngEntityID =966466.

17. See www.skai.gr, 10/12/2008.

produced original information and allowed the subjects of the revolt to challenge the model of vertical information of corporate media (Tsimitakis, 2009) and to give an autonomous meaning to the facts. More specifically in Athens, a long negative tradition of Greek collectivities in collaboration issues was overcome – thus allowing meetings of bloggers / twitterers to take place and "alternative media" to emerge – and the foundations of an "pen and participative network of citizen journalism" would be established.[18] In short, in December 2008 an "online activism" took place that shaped an alternative public space of information and dialogue, in complete contrast to the mainstream media. This (counter-)information was not solid and homogeneous, rather was incontrollable, with different codes and diverse transmitters and receivers (Metropolitan Sirens, 2011: 139).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

We analysed the December 2008 Greek youth movement as a hybrid collective actor that joined different groups of excluded young people and we were based on different aspects of their action: The movement was massive, complex, heterogeneous and decentralized; it demonstrated viable conflictuality, high capability of breaking established rules, and communicated through online activism. Let us recapitulate briefly and end up with some theoretical concerns. We have proposed that the construction of the collective identity that gave rise to the collective actions of the movement should be examined thoroughly, insofar as in most analyses that identity and those actions were taken for granted.

As a matter of fact, the December movement was dealt with similarly in an overwhelmingly great number of heated analyses by both social and political scientists and journalists, who either supported or criticized the movement. In these analyses, the movement is attributed exclusively to "external causes", and almost never to the fact that its members participated in the process of its creation. The collective action of the movement seems to have emanated automatically from the emotional and psychological impact that the moral shock caused by Alexis' murder had on the young people; or, in the best case, it seems to have originated from the fact that moral shock activated the "collective action seeds" that already pre-existed in the juvenile psychological and emotional sub-stratum, and that had been generated by the "multiple crises" of the past: crises of poli-

18. See http://oneiros.gr/blog/2008/12/07/griotscoverage.

tics, labour market, values, education, family etc. It had almost never been acknowledged that the collective identity of the movement included the components of an acting collectiveness: namely, solidarity, common cognitive tools and cultural codes, active relations and dense communication. Furthermore, the processes of change of political conscience, the loss of legitimacy of the system, the behavioural change leading from fatalism to assertiveness and the birth of a new sense of effectiveness – as outcomes of the construction of a protest movement (Piven and Cloward, 1980: 25-26) – were all either ignored completely or, at best, taken for granted from the very beginning.

Therefore, the movement was thought in negative terms as an expression of crises rather than in positive terms as an expression of a conflict, the features of which –namely, opponents, objectives, allies, identity, opportunities and restrictions of action – were shaped dynamically and unexpectedly as the action was evolving. Of course, in the name of order, many organic intellectuals of the State would add to the discussion one more variable: the supposedly "Greek peculiarity", that is, a deeply-rooted "underdog culture" that undermines the culture of rational resolution of conflicts, an "endemic culture of violence" that accompanies historically Greek society and mainly its youth, as a remnant of the "distorted" development and the "deficient" modernization that distinguishes Greek society.[19] Thus, part of the conservative discourse, which resulted as one of the consequences of December,[20] has frequently advanced this argument, too.

The form of sociability that was seen in the December movement evolved within the dialectics of definition of its collective identity (Jenkins, 2007: 144), in a way that is beyond any attempt to objectify it and beyond any effort to (re)present it as a pure and undisputable "object" of analysis. The

19. For a succinct observation on the frequent recurrence of the argument of "negative national peculiarity" in the conservative press, magazines and journals, see Sevastakis, 2009.

20. Overall, conservatism, as an opening to opportunities for action by the movement to its opponents, includes a general shift of the political landscape to the right; that is, the conservative shift of the Communist Party of Greece and the process of criminalization of immigrants in the eyes of public opinion – something that in the elections for European representatives in June 2009 would be reflected on the strengthening of the most racist political party, LAOS, and, later, on an explicit turn of the two ruling parties (New Democracy and PASOK) concerning immigration and asylum policy. At the other extreme, it seems that (Liofagos et al., 2009) the movement – networking in daily life and deepening the political consciousness and unified action –has opened opportunities for future action both to individual groups through "underground" action (e.g., student groups, autonomous collectivities) and to groups of the extra-parliamentary Left through political cooperation and organizational unification.

form itself of collective identity and collective action of the movement, was actually one of its "possible potentials", it was that which finally took place under the weight of complex objective parameters (mainly external categorization) and unexpected subjective choices (processes of internal collective self-determination).

In other words, the movement was built as a hybrid collective actor that joined different groups of excluded young people, through their choices of action, against their opponents, when encountering them. In his *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, Max Weber defines social relationship as "[…] the behavior of a plurality of actors insofar as, in its meaningful content, the action of each takes account of that of the others and is oriented in these terms. The social relationship thus consists entirely and exclusively in the existence of a probability that there will be a meaningful course of social action – irrespective, for the time being, of the basis for this probability" (Weber, 1978: 26-27).

Actually, in December 2008, we saw a movement producing a strong meaningful course of actions. The movement produced creative interactions between different groups of young people. Those interactions constructed a new common collective identity. Weber notes that in the empirical world "a social relationship in which the attitudes are completely and fully corresponding is in reality a limiting case", (ibid.: 27). Taking this into consideration, we should acknowledge that the "social relationship"established by the Greek youth movement in December 2008 shifted, dynamically and to a significant degree, towards this limiting case. Besides, insofar as people who participate in social movements often believe in a strong collective identity, this identity is genuine, at least, for the action it produces.

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