Westernizing the Semi-Orient and De-Westernizing the Semi-Occident: The Past, Present, and Future of Athens (Greece)

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ABSTRACT   Negotiating the current state of cities held hostage by dysfunctionality and poverty caused by the global financial crisis has been a great challenge for the cities' residents. Athens, a case in point, is currently in a state of between-ness, grounded in its turbulent history and the precariousness of its current trajectory, which so far has been unsuccessfully dealt with by social movements, and political and economic bodies. This article explores the reasons behind this failure by providing a brief overview of Athens past and present, considering current directions of the political situation and the city's ability to sustain itself, and making some recommendations about potentialities and future actions.

With what spirit, what heart,
what desire and passion
we lived our life: a mistake!
So we changed our life.

(Giorgos Seferis, "Denial")

The cities of the present remain alive at any cost. By celebrating virtual prosperity, negating undeniable failure and embracing survivalism go on existing as the aftermath of a departed industrial era; never able to fully become disengaged from their past, still, always rediscovering their "identities" through the genres of contemporaneity. Globalization, neoliberalism, privatization, unsettlement are intertwined with what Virilio calls "dromology," "the political economy of speed," and the "unrelenting acceleration" (Armitage 1999: 35) of the modern world. This schema affects all cities: the ones in the process of evolving from their modern to their hypermodern state, the ones that are yet to become modern, and the ones in between. A representative model of the third condition is Athens. During the forty years since the end of Hounta (*coup d'état*) and the rehabilitation of democracy in Greece, its residents have experienced the rise and fall of Athens as the next great metropolis, and the life and death of the Greek middle class. Its uniqueness lies in the fact it has never been fully industrial, Western, or modern. As a result of this and in order to achieve recognition as a European city, it has been struggling for more than two centuries to distance itself from its oriental character.

Athens' journey toward modernity started in May 1833 when Otto, the son of King Ludwig of Bavaria and the first king of the newly established Greek state (and protectorate of England, France, and Russia), during his first visit symbolically initiated the process of building a "home" in his new land (Bastéa 1989). He did not have the capacity to reign because he was just 17 years of age and Athens was hitherto the capital of the new state but nonetheless, at that moment the "once the city of Theseus and Hadrian" became "Otto's city" (Bastéa 1989: 12). Not long after that incident, Athens took Naflion's place as the Greek capital (December 1, 1834).

What preceded Athens' acknowledgment as the beholder of a glorious past and a Western future was almost 400 years of Ottoman occupation (since 1456), which, according to Bastéa, "disappeared after a decade of fighting the war of independence" (Bastéa 1989: 21). Before the revolution, around the beginning of the nineteenth century, Athens was a city of 9,000 inhabitants and had a homogenized fabric, as reported by foreign travelers whose descriptions depicted Muslim and Greek dwellings as identical. Its demographic

was comprised of Greek, Muslim, and Albanian populations, of which the first two were similar in number. It couldn't be characterized as urban because it lacked any industrial activity and primarily small-scale farming sustained its inhabitants, a situation that didn't change dramatically after the end of the revolution (Bastéa 1989).

Nevertheless, after the end of the war all the preexisting social structures and everyday customs for indigenous Greeks were radically altered; "the tightly-knit social fabric of the small Ottoman town was torn apart. A new city was born" (Bastéa 1989: 21). And the division between ethnicities that had coexisted for four centuries didn't happen overnight. The "propaganda" of distancing Athenians from Ottoman influences started before the revolution, by Greek merchants and scientists who had been educated in European universities and greatly supported Greece's shift toward the Enlightened European discourse (Kalantidou 2014).

As expected, the agenda of modernizing Greece influenced greatly the urban planning approach that was adopted for the reconstruction of Athens destroyed by war and the provision of housing to fleeting indigenous populations from the Ottoman parts of Greece. In addition to the "enlightened" Greeks' efforts to direct the urbanizing process of Athens, the imposition of a Bavarian scheme of laws, urban design guidelines following European models of planning, the ambition to bring to the front the glorifying history of Athens, and the Greek Orthodox Church's interference defined the creation of the "modern city." The outcome was far removed from its previous structure and its Ottoman elements. The market (agora), which had been the center of social, political, religious, and economic activity, and was the main design feature of the city, was overlooked by the foreign engineers and planners, who put emphasis on municipal services such as sanitation and waste, water, housing, and education, and moving the city's activity from the market to the street (Bastéa 1989). Through this course of development a lot of post-occupancy impromptu designs rose in the form of clear divisions between residents according to their financial status and their ethnicity. This was just the first sign of how untamed Athens would prove to be in relation to clean-cut imposed plans and "visions." In the approximately 200 years since its liberation, its milieu has been transformed several times not so much by architects and planners, but predominantly by political, economic, and social circumstances, such as the 1893 Greek state bankruptcy, the Asia Minor disaster (1922), the First World War (1914–18), the Second World War (1939–45), the Civil War (1946–9) and, finally, the military juntas of 1967–74 after the 1967 *coup d'état*. Above all, the constantly growing population – which rose abnormally with the influx of immigrants from the coastal lines of Asia Minor and the Pontic Sea after Greece's defeat in 1922, the uncontrolled urbanization in the 1950s and 1960s, and the arrival of the first flow of Balkan immigrants – shaped its culture and borderland character.

Of these migration waves, the first two had the biggest impact on Athens' modern urban configuration. After the loss of their homes, thousands of refugees from the "lost homelands" (Kalantidou 2014: 45) were settled on the outskirts of Athens in informal settlements, which consisted of illegal dwellings. The so-called *afthereta* (unauthorized developments) were usually built on legally acquired land but didn't follow any urban planning specifications (Røe 2002: 124).

The next migration wave was internal: a massive relocation of rural populations to the city took place to strengthen the country's first industrial steps, supported by political events such as Greece's inclusion in the Marshall Plan,[1] as part of Truman's effort to control its internal turmoil and inhibit the threat of communist infiltration (Hogan 1987). This was facilitated by the defeat of the left-wing band of irregulars and the end of the Greek Civil War in 1949. By eliminating the hazard of communist sovereignty, Greece's financial development was set on the path of liberalism, consumption, and private property. As part of the industrialization process, but also as a means of protection from political discrimination, rural inhabitants relocated to urban centers and especially to Athens. The tripling of its population between 1940 and 1981 demonstrates how significant the need for housing infrastructure was. As a solution, the *exchange in kind* phenomenon (*antiparochi*) was adopted, a quid pro quo method where the owner of usually a plot or a small piece of land had to hire a contractor/developer in order to construct a multistory building from which he (the landowner) would receive an apartment (or more than one) equivalent to the value of the plot minus the building costs. The buildings were usually between three and five stories high, and generally there weren't any binding legal restrictions regarding the height, facade, or surface area specifications (a lot of these buildings were illegal or didn't follow the General Building Code).

As a result of this scheme, numerous multistory buildings were constructed in the 1960s and 1970s, providing an "easy fix" through the availability of a large stock of affordable small and medium-sized apartments. As a consequence, uncontrolled reconstruction over a period of twenty years, combined with a lack of urban planning (Kotzamanis 1997), created a concrete "jungle" of high population density unable to cover the basic need for public open space and green areas within the city. To address its urban development issues, an attempt was made to reconfigure Athens' Urban Plan (ORUP) in 1985, but this failed because of a conflict of interests between petty owners and large investment projects. What happened instead was a rapid suburbanization that was closely connected to Greece's entrance into the European Union's Economic and Monetary Union (2001). The establishment of Greece's membership of Western financial society led to an illusion of eternal financial prosperity, which encouraged the middle classes and upper middle classes to relocate from the historical center of Athens to Attica's affluent suburbs. The abandonment of the city center by nouveau riche Greeks coincided

with the massive immigrant influx that began in the early 1990s, including Balkan populations who found affordable housing solutions in the city center. Importing foreign manual labor was a definite sign of embracing neoliberal ideology. Athens' selection as the host city of the 2004 Olympic Games epitomized the very essence of the neoliberal condition.

Not long afterward, in 2007, Athens' extravaganza was superseded by the global financial crisis and the abrupt end of its modernization journey. The global effect of postcolonial politics, internal political corruption, and the lack of a productive *machine* reversed Greece's virtual economic growth and created a debt-driven economy choreographed by the media and assisted by the speed of information availability. The public disgrace of a nation referred to as "kleptocratic" (Bloomberg 2011) was followed by the further dishonor as a result of health care deprivation (Kentikelenis et al. 2011), unemployment, and homelessness. Athens' historic center turned into a suicide locus,[2] an immigrant ghetto, and a substance users' shelter, only a few years after the golden era of its modern Renaissance, which had included hosting the Olympic Games. At the same time a new immigrant wave originating from the Middle East and Africa entered the country clandestinely and without state permission, and became integrated into the cityscape through a "shadow" process that made the region more fragile in terms of crime and violence. Addressing the issue of undocumented immigration in the country, representatives from the Greek government stated that the immigrants' presence had turned the center of Athens into a "hygienic bomb" (Loverdos 2012), and proclaimed their unwillingness and inability to integrate the immigrants into the social fabric and their detachment from what was taking place in the heart of the city. At the same time, NGOs[3] and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) expressed their concern about both the safety and well-being of "illegal" immigrants, as well as the growing number of indigenous populations living under the poverty line, characterizing the situation as an escalated "humanitarian crisis" (UNHCR 2010). The devaluation of people, Greek and non-Greek, was recognized and movingly expressed by Alain Badiou in 2012, in a collective declaration against technocratic austerity:

> The worsening of the artificial and coercive debt problem was used as a weapon to attack an entire society. It is proper that we speak here of terms related to the military: we are indeed dealing with a war conducted by means of finance, politics and law, a class war against society as a whole. And the spoils that the financial class wrestles away from the "enemy" are the social benefits and democratic rights, but ultimately it is the very possibility of a human life that is taken. The lives of those who do or do not consume enough in terms of profit maximization strategies should be no longer preserved. (Badiou 2012)

Two years after this statement, Athens is still a hostage, a casualty, and an offender; poverty prevails, social stratification becomes ever-more present, and the financial dead end that the city and its people currently face seems irreversible. Still, there is potential lurking in available but unused human capital, mostly consisting of young people, who could contribute to the reframing of the city with whatever cultural capital remains and by generating a new city.

Athens' Ontology of Today and the Prospect for Tomorrow: The Challenge of Redirecting Design, and Social and Political Agency

> The city of the future is not the inertia of immobility, but the dictatorship of movement.

> Paul Virilio, *Pure War*

From the beginning of the financial crisis until the present day, Athenians have increasingly experienced socioeconomic degradation and worldwide public humiliation. Pursuing this further, Athens faced the side effects of decades of clientelistic practice and political nepotism[4] that stripped state mechanisms naked and let corruption thrive. The calming effect of "knowing someone who knows someone who can fix this" – an acknowledgment rooted in Greeks' consciousness since the 1821 War of Independence and the beginning of the nation's existence – was abruptly replaced by insecurity and fear of the unknown. This led to polarizations (rage against immigrants and the rise of the extreme right) (Jacobson 2011) and phenomena such as "Xenios Zeus," a mass "sweeping" operation that started its action in August 2012, and resulted in the arrest of 3,996 immigrants who lacked the necessary legal documents. The "illegal" immigrants were held in detention centers that started operating in the second half of 2012 and were funded by the European Union.[5] Subsequently, the center of the city became a *terra vetita*, or forbidden zone, leaving no other choice to these people but to become marginalized caricatures, carrying the burden of a "crime" they didn't commit, especially since the state evidently made it impossible for them to obtain official papers through legitimized procedures (Dalakoglou 2012).

Yet again, the excluded "other," the framed elements from the out-of-field who "are neither seen nor understood, but are nevertheless perfectly present" (Deleuze 1986: 16) was one of the burning issues that triggered the formation of an "active society" which, driven by self-preservation, expressed opposition against a decrepitude brought about by the market (Polanyi 2001). These phenomena prompted an explosion of upheavals in the capital, in which hundreds of mistreated citizens took part to demonstrate their distress and desperation. One of the many examples was that of "los indignados,"[6] which was a spontaneous movement that appeared

in Madrid, Barcelona, and Athens, through the daily gathering of people coming mostly from the neo-poor (and former middle class) and lower classes, to central squares. In Athens, Syntagma Square became a place where people, by holding banners that expressed their outrage, were establishing an abstract resistance and asserting the need for change. Unintentionally, these people shaped an improvised political landscape that was nevertheless irrelevant to a concrete political context community, who didn't have an agenda but realistic arguments. What was achieved through this demonstration of protest against the neoliberal regime was a reengagement with the public space, an instigation of neighborhood mobilization, the organization of networks between localized actions, and a wider social movement through well-connected activists (Arampatzi and Nicholls 2012).

This public stance of "resistance" generated the belief that reclaiming the public realm and encountering the neoliberal scheme was in order. This position was supported by researchers such as Jacobson, who claimed that urban movements in Athens and Barcelona could be an answer to the growing precarity, constantly fed by the neoliberal state policies, especially in southern European cities, and a reaction to the constant efforts of governments to turn the city into a policed, regulated milieu (Jacobson 2011). Dalakoglou (2012) and Arampatzi and Nicholls (2012) perceived group gatherings (Syntagma Square) and the mobility of neighborhood groups and activists as acts of solidarity that could transform the deconstructed Athenian urban scenery.

Not long after this overwhelming expression of egality, the voices are scattered and not as loud. The situation remains the same despite the persistent isolated endeavors of collectives and NGOs to improve the living conditions of the underprivileged and repair culture and urban fabric. The confrontation of a number of well-rooted problems related to political, architectural, urban, and environmental implications still awaits; inevitably, what is required is the identification of the complexity of the situation, a detailed mapping of the existing hindrances, and the creation of a platform where a new ideology and a redirected design of civic life can be grounded.

Starting with the political sphere, it is important first to underline the paralyzed condition of the state mechanism, dismantled by political parties' patronage practices, nepotism, and corruption, and the need for a political voice that will demand a new state mechanism. This voice, in order to be political, has to identify with the community. Community, in its current form, as a sum of empirical categories of people, cannot bring political change before becoming a community of people where no one can stand out – as an idea, group, or political entity; where being a whole signifies not being included in the whole (Dikeç rephrasing Rancière, 2005: 177).

If this is achieved, the political activity of a community can be directed toward matters such as poverty, unsustainability, youth

unemployment, immigrants' safety and inclusion, and civilians' security in conditions of democracy, and can be disseminated through a variety of agents (movement bodies, intellectuals, publications, rallies, etc.), encouraging negotiation and planning on policy issues (Fraser 1995). South Korea stands out as a successful example of political transformation (after 1987) happening as a result of the influence of social representation, which promoted a novel political schema regarding its democratic reshaping. Yoonkyung Lee identified the "duration of mobilization, the diversity of the participating actors (from teenagers to housewives), the breadth of political agenda (from food safety to government accountability), the ingenuity in the protest culture, the dexterous utilization of information technology (such as instantaneous spread of digital images and real-time airing of the rallies via cell phones and wireless Internet) and the absence of political parties" (Lee 2009: 28–29) as the most important characteristics of social mobilization, by investigating the role social movements played in the democratic development of South Korea.

In light of this evidence, it is important to highlight the contribution of physical space to the formation of political engagement; in order to do so, physical space has to be positioned in a condition of "post-architecture" (Virilio 1991) under the contemporary globalizing conditions; it also needs to be situated in the Westernized urban context of legal walls and time–space liquidity, physical exhaustion, and surveillance. Virilio, in an interview conducted almost fifteen years ago, explicitly demonstrated his belief that: "We have become de-territorialized. Our embedding in our native soil, that element of *hic et nunc* (here and now), 'in situ', that embedding belongs, now, in a certain way, to the past. It has been overtaken by the acceleration of history, by the acceleration of reality itself, by 'real time', and by the 'live', all of which are in a stage beyond the *hic et nunc*, 'in situ' condition" (Armitage 1999: 26). What comes out of this condition are limitless possibilities enacted by technology, which has made redundant everyday aspects of life such as the nine-to-five timetable and what used to revolve around it for many decades. Walls, as a symbol of physical limitation, have been shifted by the technological overtaking of space. Yet again, laws against the phenomena of "terrorism" have transformed Western societies into modern citadels by adopting bordering mechanisms (Weber 2002) and by erecting walls against immigrants. A typical example of this situation is Europe, which by building the "walls of its nice castle, cannot see that what is being built is, in fact, its grave" ("The Heretic European Generation" 2009). In this way, the entry points of the cities have been replaced by the airport, a zone of legal authority and high surveillance. Subsequently, physical city limits have been replaced by more complex and undetectable means of control that have altered the metropolitan urban character. The creation of virtual environments by the enabling nature of technology has also transformed

the cityscape by eradicating the need for physical presence and interaction in the urban milieu.

In other words, the contemporary metropolis (and particularly, Athens) is a place of physical and psychosocial remoteness, established and undisputed surveillance; a sophisticated prison and a globalized periphery. Under these circumstances, Athens has turned into a non-place where in order to establish a topos of action, three contradictory parameters have to be taken into consideration: reflection on and positioning the universal, eradication and discovery of the local, and affirmation and challenging of the "roots" (Augé 1997).

As a result, creating the likelihood of a future for Athens shouldn't start from a place but from individuals as a social body, going against the domineering fragmentation in the social, economical, urban, architectural domain. Levebvre described this as a "spatial 'pedagogy' of the body and its rhythms: an architecture of jouissance understood as a formation of senses" (Stanek 2011: 249). Reclaiming the right to live by rediscovering the local within the universal could derive from "jouissance," where "production of space, dwelling, and space itself" (Stanek 2011: 249) arise from an interdisciplinary interpretation of the world through areas of knowledge such as philosophy, anthropology, history, psychology, and economy. The approach can lead to a politics of propinquity in relation to a given regional space, by recognizing the variety and the diversity of cultural, social, and topological stimuli and people's everyday experimentation in relation to them through an informal dialectic relationship, liberated by the restraints of localism (repetition of failed norms and practices) and the transcriptions of globalism (homogeneity and compliance). Such politics of space would address the daily debates of the customary in all spheres of human activity such as work, habitation, education, public space etc. having as a main concern the representation of difference, the challenging of "security," the fulfillment of genuine needs (Amin 2004).

For the creation of political space and reclamation of the urban, it is important to diagnose contemporary cities' ecological malady and their undeniably unsustainable present. In the case of Athens, the concern regarding sustainability is focused on a city that has missed the opportunity to reform itself on numerous occasions. For instance, during preparations for the Olympic Games, the state received financial support provided by the International Olympic Committee to reform urban areas by turning them into green spaces and by establishing systems of waste management. This never happened. On the contrary, a comparison between the Sydney and Athens Olympic Games demonstrated the latter's lack of exploitation of alternative energy resources such as the sun and wind, whereas in the case of Sydney, 40 percent of the energy used for the operational needs of the Olympic village came from solar and aeolian energy. Furthermore, the only attempt to plant green lungs in the concrete chaos of Athens turned into a huge failure because of the notorious

governmental disorganization and unsuccessful administration. Soon after the end of the Olympic Games, thousands of trees withered and died, either because they were unsuited to the semi-arid climate of Athens or due to the lack of planning for preservation and watering (Beriatos 2006).

As a result of decades of state inefficiency and ineptness, anarchic construction of high-rise buildings and high-density neighborhoods, and the absence of civilians' environmental education, Athens is a polluted, ecologically devastated city that is on the verge of not being able to sustain itself. The degradation of the quality of air, water, food, and physical environments, and the adoption of crisis-driven, cheap, unsustainable solutions such as burning wood for heat in the winter, consuming "artificial" food, and renovating old apartments with unsustainable materials, beg for immediate solutions. The required "task, although enormously complex is quite clear; it is to develop mental and material practices that can produce forms that sustain" (Fry 2011: 201) to "deal with what already exists" (Fry 2009: 5).

A lot of non-state initiatives in the form of social groups and a limited number of state and municipality initiatives are generating critical discourse and public space interventions, and express their concerns for the degradation of the urban habitat and the trivialization of human life. These solitary efforts, though, can't fight poverty, unsettlement, immigration, unsustainability, climate change, and the uncritical acceptance of the meta-Western model imposed on Greece, and especially Athens, without having a common and multifaceted agenda, strategy, and vision of doing things otherwise.

A case in point is an initiative that has been recently taken up by the Municipality of Athens in collaboration with the University of Thessaly, i.e. the implementation of the first Plan of Integrated Urban Intervention. Its goal is to reevaluate unused spaces in the historic city center of Athens; it targets four downtown districts and includes eighteen axes revolving around the promotion of entrepreneurialism, the rehabilitation of conditions of safety and security, the rehabitation of the city center, and the reinforcement of the city's image. Some of the recommended measures are to "simplify the process of stores with hygienic interest, to create a database with the stores' licenses, to form groups consisted of police, municipality, prefectural officers and the district attorney for the realization of inspections and disinfections of abandoned and old buildings, predominantly inhabited by immigrants" ("The 18 Axes" 2014). This project exhibits real potential by discussing issues of public space and by promoting the rehabilitation of stigmatized areas and the reinvigoration of rundown neighborhoods, through a process of metrofitting, especially for abandoned areas outside the historical center or and the commercial triangle of the city center. Nevertheless, despite the best intentions of its designers, it is grounded in unrealistic aims, especially by promoting the implementation of a plan carried out through eighteen different axes of activity while not having enough funding, organizational

support coming from the government and the Municipality of Athens, a follow-up plan, and mechanisms of post-occupancy evaluation. Also, based on the financial and organizational state that the city is in, the chances of hiring enough trained staff, and successfully coordinating the collaboration between different public and private bodies to support its causes, are slim.

What also needs to be addressed here is that the future of Athens is not just locally defined but it is bounded by external restrictions (International Monetary Fund, European Union) and a global economic, political, and social fluidity in the context of the rise of global city regions and "global cities" as the centers of "operations of multinational corporations … information-processing activities and advanced services, and as deeply segmented social spheres marked by extremes of poverty and wealth" (Scott 2008: 130–31).

Consequently, presenting a situation and discussing the multidimensional existence of a city in between, a borderland, cannot lead to definite answers and solutions. The only recommendation coming from this article would be for the residents of Athens, and every city with a "glorious" past and an uncertain trajectory, to find the courage and the strength to develop a new ethos that would then lead them to culturally reclaim the city, their city. And even if Athens' future as a city of the world and a city for its people appears to be prefigured by the novel world order, its chaotic status, and its contemporary social syntax of space, nonetheless it doesn't mean that it can't be the place from which to re-begin, to start over by taking difficult decisions, different directional choices, and approaching life through more than one truth.

Notes

1. The Marshall Plan was named after the American Secretary of State George Marshall, appointed in 1947 by US President Harry Truman. Marshall was the architect of the European Recovery Program (ERP), a financial (nearly $13 billion in total) and technical support (machinery, guidance for and investment in industrial development) program for sixteen European countries through the Economic Cooperation Administration (ECA) of the United States. The plan was completed in 1951.
2. One of the many examples is the incident that took place on April 4, 2012, when an elderly man committed suicide in front of the parliament building in Syntagma Square in Athens, while the square was packed with people ("Man Commits Suicide" 2012).
3. Dr Nikitas Kanakis, head of the Greek branch of Doctors of the World, stated in 2012: "Everyone is afraid. Athens has become a city of fear … The lack of night shelters or public places to go and wash is a huge problem" ("Greece to Open New Detention Centers" 2012).
4. Sotiropoulos and Bourikos (2001) wrote on Greek nepotism: "The former Prime Minister, Andreas Papandreou, was the son

of George Papandreou – Prime Minister in 1944 and again from 1963 to 1965. The eldest grandson of the latter, also named George Papandreou, is the current Minister of Foreign Affairs. The present Prime Minister, Costas Simitis, is the son of a well-known left-wing politician who participated in the anti-Nazi resistance of the 1940s. The current leader of New Democracy [the conservative party], Costas Karamanlis, is a nephew of the former Prime Minister and President of the Republic, Konstantine Karamanlis, who founded New Democracy in 1974. Can we say that political nepotism is, therefore, rampant in Greece?"

5. In 2012, the Minister for Citizen Protection, Michalis Chrysohoidis, announced the campaign to move 30,000 illegal migrants into "closed hospitality centers" under a €250m (£208m) EU-funded scheme ("Greece to Open New Detention Centers" 2012).

6. The indignant ("oi Aganaktismenoi" in Greek).

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