Rebellion of Greek youth

The rebellion of Greek youth in December 2008 has already secured a place in the history of modern social movements, not because of the extent of the rioting, but rather because it came as an expression of deeper social tensions, political ruptures and ideological displacements amidst a growing capitalist crisis. In short, it looked like a sign of things to come.

Clearly the killing of 15-year-old Alexandros Grigoropoulos by a police officer acted as a catalyst for the various forms of social discontent already brewing in Greek society. First of all, the education system is in crisis. A highly competitive system of entrance exams for higher education, requiring huge amounts of study and expensive tutorial courses, leads only to a university degree that does not guarantee secure employment. The dire state of education is exacerbated by attempts to implement the so-called 'Bologna process' reforms, which include various downgradings of university degrees – such as delinking academic titles and professional qualifications, the introduction of harsher disciplinary measures and an intensified pace of study. In addition, there are continued attempts to legalize private higher education in Greece, despite an explicit constitutional ban on private universities, a ban that was reinforced by the struggle of university students against the proposed amendment of the constitution back in 2006–07.

The attacks on youth and education cannot be separated from the economic crisis. With the Greek economy sliding into recession, households are facing stagnant wages, job insecurity and rising indebtedness, compounded by a policy of strict fiscal austerity. The prospect of massive lay-offs in the near future aggravates things, as does the Greek government's commitment to highly unpopular pensions reforms and privatization of state-run companies.

The long period of state repression – from the defeat of the Left in the Civil War (1946–49) up to the period of military rule (1967–74) – gives hostility towards the police and state a particular inflection and prevents it from being mere 'delinquency'. Elements of popular radicalism and militancy, originating in the post-dictatorship radicalism of the 1970s, persist and are fuelled by subsequent waves of protest, especially among students. As a result the occupation of public buildings, especially universities, and defiant stances against forces of order gain a broader legitimacy than perhaps elsewhere. For many years attempts to discredit and eliminate these enduring collective representations in the name of 'modernization' have been the main preoccupation of the 'organic intellectuals' of Greek capitalism.

The rebellion managed to gain the support of segments of the workforce, such as younger workers, teachers and people in precarious posts of intellectual labour. However, in other strata of the working class and the traditional petty bourgeoisie, insecurity has led to more conservative reflexes.

Interpreting the December rebellion as a mere expression of rising insecurity, social tensions, growing inequality and state repression would miss both its importance and its originality. This particular rebellion tended to *unite* different segments of youth. It included both students in higher education and young people facing social exclusion. It happened in all kinds of schools and neighbourhoods. No part of Greece was immune. It included Greeks and immigrants. This can be equated neither with the French student movement against the 'First Employment Contract' nor with the *banlieue* riots: it was more like a combination of both. For the first time it was not just the student movement but the whole *youth movement* that dominated the social scene, forcing political analysts and commentators to come to terms with a neglected social subject. The movement accelerated the rearticulation of a collective identity among Greek youth. This vaunted struggle, solidarity, hostility towards authority and the traditional political scene, also conveyed a deeply anti-systemic demand for radical change in all aspects of social life. As such, the rebellion had elements of an articulated political discourse and was not a 'blind' social explosion. One could sense this not only in tracts by leftist or anarchist groups but also in the way students expressed their rage against what they called the 'policies that kill our dreams'. This political character was similarly evident in the appeal of slogans such as 'down with the government of murderers'. Even the most extreme cases of street violence, such as the mass destruction of banks and retail stores in the centre of Athens on 8 December, were directed mainly against symbols of economic power.

Facing a movement of such intensity and extent the Greek government found itself in an awkward position. Resorting to further police repression and exceptional measures, such as forbidding demonstrations, risked provoking even more violence. Trying to mobilize the 'silent majority' threatened to turn into an open call for far-right violence (something that actually happened in Patras with neo-Nazis posing as 'angry shopkeepers' alongside the police). Attempting to create a general consensus around its policies pushed even the neo-liberal 'socialists' of PASOK to insist on the government's resignation. Consequently, it tried a combination of waiting for the Christmas holidays and promising a harsher police stance in the future, including enforcing the right of police to enter university campuses in violation of the 'university sanctuary'.

As a true social explosion, representing a condensation of all the contradictions of Greek capitalism, and with youth acting as the 'weakest link in the chain', the rebellion was simultaneously the result of deeper social processes and an unexpected event violently accelerating the apprehension of the current historical conjuncture and its potential. This is why it acted as a litmus test for all the groupings on the Greek Left. The Communist Party, despite its anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist rhetoric, exercised the deep-rooted conservatism of the traditional petty-bourgeois stratum that forms a large segment of its electorate. It acted as a party of 'order', accusing the youths in the streets of being 'provocateurs'. The Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA), despite its verbal support of the rebellion, in many instances succumbed to the pressure to condemn 'violence' and failed to offer a radical alternative other than its reference to a 'democratic solution' through a government of the Left; a proposition that reflects both its reformism and its electoralism. The groups of the anti-capitalist Left were at the forefront of the demonstrations and took crucial initiatives such as the effort to bring university students onto the street, the mobilization of union rank-and-file and the insistence on holding a mass rally on 10 December, when both the trade-union bureaucracy and the parties of the parliamentary Left capitulated to the demands of the government and cancelled a scheduled rally on the day of the general strike. But they have also failed so far to offer a genuine political alternative and did not manage actually to transform the various forms of activism into a coherent political mobilization and project. Anarchist and autonomous groups for the first time opted for more political forms of activism, instead of classical 'Black Bloc' tactics, thus broadening their following. But they also demonstrated the limits to their 'tribal' forms of organization aversion to mass politics.

It is obvious that social explosions such as the one experienced by Greece pose a great challenge for the Left. Given the deepening global economic crisis, more explosions might be expected elsewhere. The insistence of capitalist elites on a *fuite en avant* tactic of even more flexible labour markets, harsher fiscal austerity and more privatization can only aggravate social tensions. The question is how to transform social discontent into conscious class antagonism, how to turn the movement into a true social force. This entails thinking about political representation or 'translation'. But thinking about 'politicization' either in terms of a government change or in traditional terms of 'revolutionary' verbalism misses the point. Nor is it a question of a simple change of policies, even if tangible gains, for example in educational policy, are more than necessary. What is needed is the twenty-

first-century equivalent of a 'democratic revolution', a set of political goals and values that would represent a clear break with 'actually existing neoliberalism'. That could include: reversing all policies that devalue living labour; re-establishing the public character of all collective goods and services (education, health, social security and environment); re-establishing the right to mass collective action against all forms of state repression, discipline, surveillance; refusal to participate in imperialist campaigns; disobedience in the face of all forms of economic discipline originating from international organizations and treaties. Such demands can open up the way to pose radical social change as a historical possibility.

Panagiotis Sotiris

Peace, legality, democracy

The riots and protests that broke out in Athens and other Greek cities on the night of 6 December were unprecedented in both character and magnitude. Despite the state's attempt to obscure the political character of the events, it was clear that the country was facing not simply a reaction to police brutality and the death of a young boy, but the revolutionary desire of a nascent radical political subject. 'The troublemakers', commented Prime Minister Karamanlis, 'proved once more … that their target is social peace, legality and democracy itself.' It was probably the first time he had stated the truth. For the crowd that took to the streets targeted precisely these three pillars of Greece's political reality.

Social peace. The 'December events' did not simply challenge the mythical social peace, but unleashed a political antagonism that escaped the established and cosy relationship between the state, on one hand, and the institutional workers' union (GSEE) and leftist parties, on the other. As a pamphlet of the ASOEE (Athens University of Economics and Business) occupation put it succinctly: 'the Varkiza peace agreement has been broken. We are in civil war once again' – a reference to the agreement that attempted to end the Greek civil war in 1945. Despite the exaggerated nature of the claim, this grasped the flavour of the events. It was the first time since the insurrection at the Polytechnic School in 1973 that political antagonism had so disturbed the social peace, one that has in fact been at the service of neoliberal development and modernization.

The most recent focus in the effort to consolidate this social peace was the 2004 Olympic Games, seized by the Greek ruling class as an opportunity to express the image of a harmonious and modernized country. The reality behind the facade, however, has been the very conditions that rendered the social peace extremely fragile: an average salary of €500–700 for the majority of the population in their twenties and thirties (the €700 generation); high unemployment and a lack of social benefits; an increase in temporary work combined with a total lack of union rights; an increasing number of people living below the poverty line; and the pillaging of households by the banks – in short, a widening and deepening of social inequalities in a society that thrives on authoritarianism, nepotism and corruption.

Legality. Greece's political and social scene is made up of corrupt politicians (four ministers have been forced to resign due to their involvement in financial scandals); a scandal-ridden church with monks who have at their disposal astronomical amounts of money and engage in business deals with the state; a supine judiciary; and an elite of senior officials, entrepreneurs and managers who accumulate wealth through mega-deals and bribery. The resignation last September of the marine minister George Boulgarakis revealed an accumulated fortune of millions of euros, some fifty buildings across the country and ownership of offshore companies, all built and managed in a way that guaranteed tax advantages and profiteering within the limits of the law. Defending himself against accusations of unethical behaviour the minister explained that 'everything that is legal is also ethical' – a phrase which expressed perfectly the notion of legality to which the ruling class holds.

The crowd that took to the streets of the Greek cities opposed precisely that notion of legality that allowed ministers and entrepreneurs to grow rich with absolute impunity. The revolt, then, was not the criminal action of a small minority but the ethical-political action of a nascent political subject that opposes the state's legality and prefigures, albeit embryonically, a different kind of 'legality' and a different kind of 'order'.

Democracy. In an attempt to criminalize and disguise the appearance of this political subject, and to save face abroad, the country's secretary-general of information called the events a 'hijacking of democracy' and described the rioters as 'a small, marginal group of a few hundred extremists'. In fact, the 'small marginal group' consisted of thousands of protesters in Athens and other cities, and was made up of workers, teachers, artists, students, immigrants and the

unemployed. The 'hijacking of democracy' was precisely the unexpected coming-together of the various elements of this nascent political subject, one which demanded not merely 'reforms' or the resignation of the government, as the parties of the institutional left did, but the abolition of the feeble parliamentary system and the democracy of cronyism and impotence. 'Burn, burn the brothel-parliament', was one of the main slogans heard in the streets, which was followed by several unsuccessful attempts to do precisely that.

Although it is true that there was no clear political agenda (but why should there be?) one needed only to hear the slogans, listen to the radio broadcasts of the occupations, or read the pamphlets and manifestos in order to see that the protesters were united under a very simple banner: 'Political, social and economic equality for all.' Referring to the events in Greece, the French president, obviously alarmed that the riots could spread to France, argued that 'in a democracy, when the people want a change this goes through the ballot box. In a democracy, it is not the street that decides.' Sarkozy betrayed how unconvincing was the Greek government's attempt to explain the events as the result of a small violent minority: he was admitting that what was at issue in Athens was change itself.

We should therefore see this crowd as an embryonic radical political subject that is emerging in the space produced by economic exploitation on one hand and the selling out of the unionism and the parliamentary Left on the other. The massive increase in low-paid part-time labour, coupled with an increase in price in all basic commodities, has produced a new army of low-paid workers, very often highly skilled and university-educated, who live on very little money and are forced to rely heavily on parental support. This new middle-class proletariat enjoys no labour rights, lives in total work insecurity, carries out unpaid overtime under the threat of job loss, and sees absolutely no prospects in the future, in the light of planned social insurance reforms that would guarantee that many will not even get a pension. With no representation in the institutional workers' union (GSEE), this army of workers is becoming politicized in a slow movement towards the formation of independent, autonomous and anti-hierarchical syndicates and groupings. To this new proletariat we need to add the already politicized and autonomously organized workers, the unemployed, the politicized student body, which last year opposed and prevented the privatization of education, and a combative grouping of immigrants.

The magnitude of the events in Athens was the product of the coming-together of these various sectors of the working class with varying degrees of politicization and a diversity of political ideas that, nevertheless, share the same anti-plutocratic values and mistrust of political parties. The attempt by the political class to criminalize the events thus aimed at masking not only the political character of the riots but also the class composition of the rioters. Everything that showed the class character of the events was thereby left out of the picture.

An important characteristic of this nascent political subject is that it assumes the necessity of some kind of political violence as a means of class struggle. In the years after the overthrow of the military dictatorship, political violence was linked to political killings or bombings associated with clandestine organizations, or small anarchist groups engaged in street fights with police. What was different in the December events was the fact that thousands of rioters took to the streets. And, despite the fact that not all protesters engaged in acts of violence, it was clear that there was a general acceptance or tolerance of violence, as was seen in the applauding of the torching of banks and stores.

Given all this, it came as no surprise that the Communist Party (KKE) sided with the extreme right-wing and nationalist party of LAOS, the ultra-conservative government of New Democracy and the centre party of PASOK in condemning the events. The only party that seemed to grasp the political character of the events and avoided criminalizing them (though it did condemn the violence) was the leftist SYRIZA. Yet SYRIZA failed to recognize the class nature of the subject, preferring instead to talk of the 'insurrection of the youth' – an ideological category that displaces the political subject from class to age, and so seriously misrepresents the events. The media, in turn, performed another displacement, from the category of 'youth' to that of 'students', allowing themselves to engage in unfocused and hypocritical criticism of politicians and other 'grown-ups' and to make vague statements concerning a better future for 'our children'.

Although it is difficult to predict to what extent this political subject will develop and the direction it will take, it can nonetheless be argued that the revolt was an important moment in its constitution. With a different approach to political violence, employing a more flexible language than the rigidly structured discourse of the institutional Left, and displaying bold political imagination, the crowd that took to the streets made clear that the balance of political forces in Greece has changed.

Mihalis Mentinis