

The Children of Riots: Society, Violence and the Youth in Greece

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IOANNIS TELLIDIS, OCT 17 2011

The Children of Riots is an Al Jazeera documentary on the current climate in Greece, with a particular focus on the youth. More concretely it traces the public sentiment of anger, frustration and betrayal that was first manifested after the shooting of Alexandros Grigoropoulos on December 6th, 2008. Watching it, reminded me of a recent conversation where I was told that resistance to police/generalised vandalism in Greece is something institutional. When I disagreed, I was asked to verify that everyone learns to hate the police.

In an effort to rationalise the remark, even though it evidently bothered me, I tried to remember when was the last time that Athens experienced zero violence during a mass protest. And the truth is three, the most recent of which being in October 15 and the other two during last summer. For reasons that hopefully will become clearer below, the police never intervened in any of them. Greek Police brutality has played (and continues to play) a significant role in society's perception of a situation of virtual permanent impunity of police officers who: exercise mindless violence against peaceful protesters; and/or try to cause grievous harm to citizens, rather than protect them (this is particularly indicative of the mentality of the security forces: no arrest, just violence...); and/or target and attack journalists; and/or try to frame peaceful protesters (at least 3 other cases became high-profile since Chapman's case); and/or offer cover to strange hooded figures that have been seen participating in or instigating violence; and/or instigate violence themselves in the worst manner, either by sending tear gas cannisters down the subway (here and here), or gassing grocery stores and taking their rage out on the fruit stands, or following fleeing peaceful protesters in lanes and alleys and attacking everyone and everything in their path including their favourite sport of throwing blast grenades (like those that left journalist Manolis Kipreos deaf in both ears) inside tavernas and shops, or throwing stones back at the protesters rather than actually seek to immobilise and arrest.

Greece's memories of the dictatorship and the police violence exercised then are still alive today. The state bureaucracy itself has made sure that the commemoration of the anti-dictatorial struggle is celebrated in schools with the appropriate anti-fascist, pro-resistance, and pro-democratic songs and poem recitals. Yet, imagine for a moment that you are 14, 15 or 16-year old and you realise that the revolutionary songs you sing, and the upheaval poems you recite against tyrants and dictators are very befitting of the reality that surrounds you. The case of Avgoustinos Dimitriou, a Cypriot exchange student in Thessaloniki, Northern Greece, is particularly unfortunate. At the end of an annual parade commemorating the very same event (the end of the dictatorship), the Cypriot student is seen walking, when he is suddenly confronted and beaten severely by a few plain clothes police officers, while a dozen more around them are doing nothing to stop them. Not knowing they were being filmed, the Police claimed Avgoustinos had fallen and hurt himself on the flower pot that was standing in front of the hotel's window. His pictures while in hospital do not seem to corroborate that. Nevertheless, the police officers involved were acquitted, and at the end of the trial, they sued the student for resisting the police, grievous bodily harm, and disturbance of the social peace...

Thus, even when you're older, the only thing that Greek Police seem to be good at is to provoke indignation. Indicatively, in the three instances that never saw a single incident in Athens, were also the instances where the police did not take any initiative at all. But you don't get to hear that because it does not make for good news. In fact, even when the protests make it to the news, it is rather peculiar to see the BBC flirting with the Greek Police's version of events, rather than the protesters. For example, a video and an image that made global headlines, tells a different

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story when told by the camera of a protester.

Police brutality is now part of everyday life. Violence from extreme political circles of all directions is on the rise, and an overall feeling of everyone-against-everyone (society vs. politicians, taxi drivers vs. train conductors, private sector vs. civil servants, etc) makes evident the crumbling of Greek society. The criminal incapacity of the state in matters of social justice (even when it comes to preserving some kind of 'prestige' in these difficult financial times) completes its sadistic relations with its "Indignant citizens". According to the German Bild, a look at the current remuneration packages of Greek politicians seem to enforce the masses' belief that their representatives consider themselves excluded from the sacrifices they advocate as necessary and unavoidable.

The Greek Orthodox Church, owner of vast amounts of land through its numerous monasteries and temples, has benefited by laws that have gradually reduced its taxes to virtually zero – on top of the fact that its 'employees' are considered to be civil servants and are therefore paid by the state (€220m per year). The owners of the world's fifth in size merchant navy are also spared of a significant amount of taxes, at the same time as their orders to Chinese and South Korean shipyards are the highest ever recorded, and the state introduces taxes for the masses, the non-payment of which will see the perpetrators having their electricity cut-off from the grid. In most cases, these particular taxes equal a monthly salary – did anyone say human rights? Finally, just recently, Makis Psomiadis, a mega-mafioso involved in smuggling, embezzlement, money laundering, forgery, and kidnapping (although this list may not be exhaustive) got arrested after being on the hunt for a while. A difference of opinion between the judge and the prosecution meant that he was free to return home until he received his sentence. As any other convict would do, Psomiadis has escaped.

All these are indicative of the lack and the loss of justice, security, stability. What is more important, however, is the very society. I still maintain earlier comments that I made about the constitutive members of the "indignants" movement, some of which (mainly the older ages) are indignant because they want *nothing* to change, therefore leaving the younger generations more and more desperate. This means that the common adolescent behaviours of "I hate everyone", "no-one understands me" and "everyone ignores me" together with the frustrations that come with having virtually no hope suddenly seem to be absolutely true in the Greek case (and justifiably so).

Therefore, if you were a young boy/girl living in Greece, wouldn't you at least wonder "So, how was it different during the dictatorship?"

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