

Reading revolt as deviance: Greek intellectuals and the December 2008 revolt of Greek youth

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Abstract

The December 2008 revolt of Greek youth was one of the most important recent examples of mass mobilization in advanced capitalist social formations, exemplifying rising social tensions and youth disenchantment with dominant neoliberal policies. However, an important segment of Greek intellectuals and social theorists refused to acknowledge its potential as a highly original form of collective action. Instead of trying to analyze it in terms of the underlying social dynamics that created the conditions of its possibility as a form of social and political protest and movement, they opted to treat it as a case of social deviance, anomie, and evidence of a deficient political culture. This attitude is the result of mainstream Greek intellectuals' attachment to projects of capitalist modernization and their ideological displacement in the context of a crisis of political strategy with repercussions for social theory.

Keywords:

Greek riots; intellectuals; social theory; social movements; contentious politics.

Introduction

The December 2008 explosion of the Greek youth was one of the most important recent examples of social mobilization, both in terms of its magnitude and of the repertoire of practices it included. However, it was analysed by a large segment of mainstream Greek intellectuals and social theorists in terms of deviance, a persistent culture of violence, lack of civility and evidence of a deficient political culture. Contrary to this position, we are going to offer an alternative interpretation of the December revolt as a highly original form of collective action that can be thought of both in terms of social movement, more particularly a youth movement, and of a protest sequence of insurrectionary character. Consequently, we are going to treat the reactions of these intellectuals and theorists as symptomatic of the inability of mainstream social and political theorists to come in terms with the social and political causes of social explosions of such magnitude. In its turn, this lack of comprehension is going to be interpreted as evidence of a theoretical crisis, which is an aspect of a crisis of hegemony in a conjuncture of economic crisis and rising social tensions and class conflicts.

In terms of methodology, we base our analysis of the reaction of Greek intellectuals to the December 2008 events on a sample of articles and texts that appeared mainly in the Greek press during and after the events. The articles

appeared in some of the major Greek newspapers, were written by academics, journalists and writers who have a constant presence in the public sphere and are generally recognized as public intellectuals.

The theoretical framework upon which we base our analysis and explanation of the role of intellectuals and their relation to social and political strategies, is influenced by Antonio Gramsci's writings on hegemony and the role of intellectuals (Gramsci 1971; Gramsci 1977) and Poulantzas' emphasis on the role of the state and state-enrolled intellectuals in the production of knowledge, the articulation of ideological discourse and the encoding of strategies (Poulantzas 2000). According to our reading of Gramsci the concept of hegemony does not refer simply to the combination of coercion and consent, but to the very complexity of the articulation of power in capitalist societies in all its forms, and is based upon Gramsci's definition of the State as 'the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules' (Gramsci 1971: 244; Gramsci 1977: 1765). Intellectuals play a strategic role in the articulation of hegemony, in the elaboration of political strategies, in the development of discourses and forms of 'common sense': 'every relation of "hegemony" is a pedagogical relation' (Gramsci 1977: 1331). Consequently, analyzing the role of intellectuals in a particular conjuncture requires analyzing the broader balance of forces in society, the strategies of social forces, and the possibility of a hegemonic crisis.

In contrast to the analysis offered by mainstream intellectuals, our own approach is based upon a Marxist interpretation of the dynamics and contradictions of capitalist accumulation and the constant efficacy of social and political antagonism, especially in a period marked by the crisis of neoliberal capitalism (Konigs (ed.) 2010; Duménil and Lévy 2011; Lapavistas *et al.* 2012), upon social movement theory (Melucci 1989; Della Porta and Diani 1999; Tilly 2004) and recent developments on the theoretical understanding of insurrectionary collective action (Seferiades and Johnston (eds.) 2012).

Greek intellectuals and their reaction to the December 2008 revolt

In this section, we attempt an overview and classification of the reactions of mainstream Greek intellectuals to the December 2008 revolt. By 'mainstream' we refer to theorists situated in political positions closer to the political centre, something that in the Greek political landscape of the 2000s could be translated to those with opinions closer to the two main power parties in Greece, the more conservative centre-right New Democracy and the social-democratic centre-left PASOK, and also to openly neoliberal tendencies. In addition, we include theorists situated in what one could describe as the 'modernizing' Left. When we refer to the 'modernizing' Left, we describe a current that represents the right wing of the Greek post-communist Left, a current that in the 1990s and parts of the 2000s was mainly associated with Synapismos (the larger constituent part of the SYRIZA coalition) and currently mainly with the party of the Democratic

Left but also the broader Centre-Left. However, the classification of theorists we use as examples is based on the different discursive modalities employed in the reactions against the December 2008 and not necessarily on the political positioning of each intellectual.¹

More specifically we have focused mainly on articles that have appeared in major Greek newspapers, such as *To Vima* and *Ta Nea*, two newspapers traditionally associated with the Centre-Left and in particular PASOK, *Kathimerini* which is the leading 'serious' Centre-Right newspaper, *Eleutherotupia*, *Avgi* and *Epohi*, as more left-leaning newspapers. Particularly for intellectuals and commentators coming from the 'modernizing' Left, we have also used articles reproduced in the website www.ananeotiki.gr.

December 2008 as social delinquency

The first reaction of some intellectuals was to discredit the December revolt as a movement, in line with the neoconservative attitude to treat social movements as sporadic irrational reactions to neoliberal orthodoxy. This was the position taken by historians Stathis Kalyvas, a US based professor, formerly associated with the right-wing Konstantinos G. Karamanlis Institute, and Nicos Marantzidis, a professor in the University of Macedonia. Kalyvas and Marantzidis, apart from being the main representatives of a 'revisionist' historical school of the Greek Civil War (that insists on treating 'red violence' as an important aspect of the Civil War and denies the socially emancipatory character of the Left guerrillas' struggle) have been the most obstinate supporters of the view that whatever happened in December 2008 was not a social movement. According to them it was not a mass movement, it was not an insurrection of the Greek youth, it had no central idea or demand and was not a result of social tensions aggravated by the international economic crisis (Kalyvas and Marantzidis 2008; Kalyvas 2009a; Kalyvas 2009b). There were no underlying social problems; only a culture of violence and disrespect for authority (Kalyvas 2008). Kalyvas exhibits the same reluctance to seek social and political causal mechanisms for political violence in his book on civil war violence, which also includes his reading of the Greek Civil War (Kalyvas 2006).

The only explanations they offer are the failure of necessary reforms, because of the resistance of organized minorities, ineffective policing, and a general incapacity to deal with a culture of violence (Kalyvas 2009, Marantzidis 2009a). For them this culture of violence is a heritage or a by-product of the 'Metapolitefsi'² political culture, which treats the demands of any social group as a noble right, justifies all forms of social mobilization, including violence against authority (Kalyvas 2008a), and treats the smooth functioning of institutions as

¹ For a more extensive statistical approach to the reactions of intellectuals to the December revolt see Costopoulos 2010.

² We use the Greek term that refers to the period that followed the 1974 fall of the dictatorship and the full establishment of parliamentary democracy. Especially its first phase (1974-1981) was characterized by social and political radicalization.

anomaly (Marantzidis 2009). Marantzidis goes even further, insisting that Greece is the last country in Europe where a 'popular democracy' ideology still prevails in the form of a left-wing populism that leads the forces of the anti-systemic Left (for Marantzidis the 'fundamentalist' Left) to support political violence, whether they admit it or not (Marantzidis 2009b; Marantzidis 2010; Marantzidis 2010a). Similar is the position of Manos Matsaganis (2009), a university professor and representative of the modernizing centre-Left, who cites as possible causes of violent protests the indifference of the Greek population towards terrorist groups, the support for totalitarian regimes in the name of their anti-imperialism and a general lack of civility. Both centre-right and centre-left commentators have seen not a movement but only violent 'hooded youths' (Somertis 2008) and violent anarchists (Papangelis 2008), and have lamented the lack of goals of values (Papangelis 2009), and the malfunctioning of the institutions (Konidaris 2008).

December 2008 as negative discourse and political nihilism

The criticism of the hegemony of anarchist violent practices and of a 'negative' political discourse has been a basic tenet of some mainstream theorists, neoliberal, neoconservative, but also from the non-radical 'modernizing' Left. These commentators have considered the widespread anti-authoritarian position of the movement as evidence of a more general crisis of politics (Papadimitropoulos 2009). They have insisted on the individualistic character of most insurrectionary practices during the December movement, stressing the danger that the new political identity that emerged during the December rebellion will enhance, despite its anarchist and leftist rhetoric, an egocentric imaginary in line with neoliberal ideology (Papatheodorou 2009, 2009a). Others attribute violence to the fact that the 'prevailing values in the society are those of distrust, lack of solidarity, indifference to common interest issues, and contempt of the law' (Zeri 2009).

A similar line of reasoning stressed the element of nihilism in the violence that erupted during the movement. In an open letter, seven university professors (with left or centre-left orientations), lamented the culture of nihilism, resentment and envy exemplified in anarchist violence and demanded zero tolerance for all forms of violence and abuse (Georgiadou *et al.* 2008). The same accusation of nihilism, attributed to the excessive rationalism of the Age of Enlightenment, is the main point of Stelios Ramfos (2008), a well-known intellectual who has championed the alignment of Orthodox Christianity and capitalist modernization.

Others, such as Haridimos Tsoukas, a neoliberal professor, have attributed this nihilism to a general climate of political and moral crisis (Tsoukas 2008). For Thanos Veremis, a professor that played an important role in the implementation of the 2007-2007 neoliberal university reforms by the New Democracy government, the problem was the inability to deal with a period of crisis (Veremis 2008). Centre-left commentators have offered a similar argument that insists on the sense of impunity that fuelled the most violent forms of protest (Gousetis 2008). For George Pagoulatos, a professor and

representative of the neoliberal version of Greek social-democracy, this should be attributed to a widespread culture of permissiveness that leads to forms of social anomie (Pagoulatos 2008). In its more eloquent version this criticism from centre-Left commentators does not deny that there are political references in the discourse and the imagery of the December explosion, but considers them a political mythology and aesthetics originating in the post-1968 radicalism that has nothing to do with today's political exigencies (Kanellis 2009). This tendency to treat the movement as inherently politically pathogenic led some well-known novelists to treat forms of protest, such as the interruption of theatrical performances, as an attack on the freedom of expression (Doxiadis *et al.* 2008). Even theorists with a critical Marxist background such as Constantinou Tsoukalas (2008) did not avoid referring to the demonstrations as blind explosions without political and ideological content.

December 2008 as crisis of civil society and its institutions

Nicos Mouzelis (2008a, 2009), a well known sociologist coming from the centre-Left, has insisted on the lack of adjustment to the exigencies of postmodern societies that led to widespread feelings of youth insecurity and attributes the characteristics of the mobilization to an underdevelopment of civil society. Although he refers to rising inequalities and new forms of pauperization (Mouzelis 2008), he attributes the same importance to the disorganization of the police force due to the political clientelism of the New Democracy government. One can discern in such interventions a combination between an earlier Marxist emphasis on social inequalities and the emphasis on institutions as facilitators of social rationalization associated with more mainstream post-Weberian and post-functionalist social theorizing. However, the unease at dealing with the movement and its dynamics is made more evident by his reference to an underdevelopment of civil society despite the fact that in December 2008 we witnessed a flourishing of grassroots initiatives.

The same tendency to underestimate the importance of social inequalities and class polarizations is evident in other interventions by intellectuals of the 'modernizing' Left. For Giannis Voulgaris (2008), a university professor and regular columnist, December 2008 exemplified a crisis of authority regarding social and political institutions with youths facing the collapse of the compromise between generations and the inability of family protection to help them cope with the difficulties of working life. For Pantelis Mpasiakos (2008), a philosophy professor, the danger is the undermining of the institutions of post-1974 democracy, for him the main achievement of the Metapolefsi period, a point also taken by Giannis Papatheodorou (2008) who treats the turn towards state authoritarianism as the result of the decay of democracy. Others simply lament the 'crisis of values' of the Greek family (Chrysostomidis 2008), in the same line as more conservative writers. For Nicos Alivizatos (2009) the eruption of violence during the December movement is the result neither of the economic crisis nor of worsening prospects for youths, but of the lack of credibility of the political system and of the crisis of education and the inability of the educational apparatus to adjust itself to the changing environment. For Alexis Kalokerinos

the movement was the result of a crisis of institutions, especially education, that create 'structural distortions' (Kalokerinos 2009: 24).

Attempts at coming in terms with the dynamics of the movement

It would be unfair to suggest that there have not been attempts to understand the dynamics of the movement. An enduring radicalism, along with a tradition of radical critical perspectives that is still vibrant in parts of the Greek academy, have produced valuable and inspired readings of the movement on the part of left-wing intellectuals. The Contentious Politics Circle, a network of academics and researchers based in Panteion University, has attempted a very interesting reading of the events of December 2008, organizing an important conference in December 2009.³ There have been interventions in the public debate, right from the beginning, stressing the need to come in terms with the causes of the explosion and to express solidarity with struggling youths (Seferiades 2008; Kouvelakis 2008; Psimitis 2009; Serdedakis 2009; Sevastakis 2009; Douzinas 2009a.; Vergopoulos 2010). Theoretical reviews such as *Synchrona Themata*, *Theseis*, and *Αληθεια* have been the venue for theoretical interventions in the debate and the same goes for the pages of the daily and weekly newspapers of the Left such as *Avgi*, *Epohi*, *Prin*.

The social and political dynamics mainstream intellectuals failed to see

The limits of thinking in terms of deviance and anomie

Events such as the December movement 'test the interpretative ability and the analytical clear-sightedness of political and social scientists' (Douzinas 2009: 107). However, there has been a significant lack of comprehension of this movement. One could expect that social unrest of this extent, duration and magnitude would have been treated as a social phenomenon demanding explanation and search for underlying social conflicts and societal trends, and would have been considered a challenge for social and political theory. On the contrary, one can discern a quick turn from the descriptive towards the prescriptive, with a strong sense of ideological bias. By this, we do not suggest that a neutral reaction to the December revolt would have been possible. What we see is that kind of ideological bias that obstructs the analysis of social phenomena and leads to a certain form of 'begging the question'. All these references to violent insurrectionary practices being the symptom of inadequately functioning institutions, lack of values, endemic political violence, crisis of political representation are not the result of actually examining the dynamics (and contradictions) of the movement, but of mainly preconceived opinions.

Treating social movements and political contention as forms of deviance and anomie has a long history in social theory and Greek mainstream intellectuals

³ See <http://contentiouspoliticscircle.blogspot.com>. See also Seferiades 2009.

are following a rather long tradition. Beginning with LeBon (2002) there has always been a temptation to treat the behavior of the 'crowd' as evidence of the political pathology of the subordinate masses. In the long tradition of sociological positivism, from Durkheim to Parsons and Merton, social unrest has always been treated as evidence of social pathology and dysfunction, despite the attempt to incorporate rebellion into the paradigm (Durkheim 2004; Thompson (ed.) 2004; Parsons 1991; Merton 1938). In the positivist tradition consensus has always been seen as a more natural societal condition than conflict and contention (Taylor, Walton and Young 1973).

In the Greek case what emerges is a treatment of the December movement as mainly deviance, both in the 'narrow' sense of activist delinquency and in the 'broad' sense of Greek youth (and Greek society) moving away from the ideal types expected in a fully modernized (or even post-modern) society. The revolt is not treated as a movement that social institutions must try to cope with, listen to its demands, enter in dialogue and negotiation with, but as something pathogenic, as 'a chain of irrational or openly anomic practices' (Sevastakis 2009: 304) and as 'the condensation of chronic degeneration of the networks and subsystems of Greek life' (Sevastakis 2010: 288). This can explain why almost all of the intellectuals discussed above finally opt for some form of disciplinary attitude. By 'disciplinary', we do not refer mainly to repressive measures, but to a more general emphasis on the need to adjust Greek society to certain social and political norms that would lead to the completion of a project of modernization.

December 2008 as social movement and insurrectionary collective action

The particular aspects of the December 2008 revolt reveal both its originality as a particular contentious sequence and the degree of its misapprehension by mainstream theorists. Contrary to viewing it just as 'rioting' and 'violent protest', we insist that the December 2008 events combine elements both of what can be termed a social movement, and more particularly a youth movement, and of a particular form of insurrectionary collective action.

Regarding the characterization of December 2008 as a social movement, not a blind social explosion, we can follow Michalis Psimitis who has shown (Psimitis 2009; Psimitis 2011) how the emergence of a cohesive collective identity, the establishment of active relationships, the emotional investment, the anti-systemic confrontational attitude and the refusal to negotiate, provide ample evidence of the emergence of a social movement. For Psimitis in December 2008, 'the movement was built as a hybrid collective actors that joined different groups of excluded young people', it produced 'a meaningful course of actions', and 'creative interactions between different groups of young people [...] [that] constructed a new common identity' (Psimitis 2011: 131).

In the same line of reasoning, we can say that we were dealing with a form of collective action that involved solidarity, engagement in conflict and breaking the limits of compatibility of a system, in line with Alberto Melucci's definition

of a social movement (Melucci 1989: 29-30; Melucci 1996). We could discern in the December movement the ‘informal networks based on [...] shared beliefs and solidarity, which mobilize about [...] conflictual issues, through [...] the frequent use of various forms of protest’ suggested by Della Porta and Diani as characteristics of a social movement (Della Porta and Diani 1999: 16). Finally we could witness the synthesis of a ‘sustained, organized public effort making collective claims on target authorities; [...] employment [...] [of] forms of political action [...] participants’ concerted public representations of [...] worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment on the part of themselves’ suggested by Charles Tilly (Tilly 2004: 3-4).

However, as mentioned above, December 2008 cannot be theorized simply as a youth movement. We must also come in terms with the diffuse, multifarious, heterogeneous and complex repertoire of practices witnessed during December 2008 and particularly how they moved beyond the traditional contours of protest both in terms of violence but also of disruptive practices. Instead of describing these practices simply as ‘rioting’, we can follow Seraphim Seferiades and Loukia Kotronaki in describing them as ‘insurrectionary collective action’ (Seferiades 2009; Kotronaki and Seferiades 2012). According to Kotronaki and Seferiades (2012: 159-160) insurrectionary collective action is characterized by geographic and social diffusion of riotous practice, by the combination of violent protest with non-violent disruptive practices such as occupations and it induces a polarization within the political system.

All these are evident in the particular dimensions of the December 2008 protests. First, the degree of mobilization was unique in modern Greek history and there are very few examples of such unrest in recent European history. A few examples can attest: mass demonstrations have taken place not only in Athens, but in almost every city and town in Greece, for the whole stretch of time up to (and including) New Year’s Eve; towns that had not experienced a mass rally in years saw clashes with the police; in hundreds of high schools some form of strike or another kept on for two weeks; the majority of university campuses was occupied up until the beginning of Christmas holidays; tens of police stations all over Greece became the target of student rallies, which often ended in rock-throwing; tens of local radio stations were briefly occupied in order for messages of solidarity to be broadcast; the studios of the National Television Company were likewise briefly occupied in prime time; Town Halls and other municipal facilities were occupied and housed mass assemblies; theatrical shows, including a première at the National Theatre, were interrupted by protesting drama students; more than 180 bank branches were attacked, many of them totally destroyed, hundreds of stores, ATMs and traffic lights were smashed, with the total cost of damages estimated to have exceeded 1.5 billion euros (Sotiris 2010).

An important aspect of the originality of December 2008 was that for the first time it was not just the student movement, but also the whole *youth movement* that dominated the social scene. The December movement united high school students and youths from vocational training centres, university students and young workers, middle-class youths and youths facing social exclusion, Greeks

and immigrants. The participation of immigrant youths was massive, marking a widespread demand for active political participation, but it took place in the general context of anger against social and political elites and not in the name of a particular identity (Kalyvas A. 2010). It was neither a classical student movement nor an explosion of disenfranchised socially excluded youth, like the 2005 *banlieue* riots in France (Wihtol de Wenden 2006; Murray 2006). Both the deterioration of employment prospects and the restructuring of the educational system provided the material basis for this unity. The movement accelerated the re-articulation of a collective identity in the Greek youth that comprises struggle, solidarity, hostility towards authority and the traditional political scene, and an anti-systemic demand for radical change in all aspects of social life. The movement was based on various forms of coordination, often informal, and self-organization (Kotronaki 2009), and used the Internet and new communication technologies extensively, following the pattern observed in other recent youth movements (Tsimitakis 2009; Biddix and Park 2008). The appeal of the movement was not limited to students alone, or to left-wing or anarchist militants. It also attracted various segments of the workforce, who found a way to express their discontent, including young workers and unemployed youths, teachers and professors, people working in precarious posts of intellectual labour. It also acted as a catalyst and accelerator for all forms of social and political activism, the best example being the movement of solidarity with Konstantina Kuneva, a Bulgarian janitor who was attacked and nearly died because of her union activity against precarious labour.

Instead of viewing the violent character of many of the protests as evidence of irrationality and lack of coherence, we must try to discern its particular logic. This tendency of treating collective violence as simply irrational and pathogenic runs contrary to much of current critical social theorizing that insists on trying to discern the particular logic of collective violence (Tilly 2003) and considers an analytical mistake to treat political violence, in all its forms, as another form of common criminal violence (Ruggiero 2006). Even the mass destruction of banks and retail stores in the centre of Athens on December 8th was directed mainly against symbols of economic power, and even youths that opted for more 'peaceful' ways to demonstrate experienced rioting as a necessary aspect of a collective effort to 'make themselves heard'. Therefore, it is possible to treat violence not as deviance and anomie, but as integral aspect of a repertoire of protest (Kotronaki 2009; Papanikolopoulos 2009). Moreover, treating the violent aspects of youth protest as a form of social deviance or delinquency would simply reproduce the neoconservative and neoliberal trend towards a disciplinary, punitive and penal treatment of social problems (Wacquant 1999; 2008).

The political dynamic of the December 2008 protests, in contrast to other movements that tended to focus on concrete policy changes, represented a more profound demand for radical social change. The rage expressed by youths against what they called the 'policies that kill our dreams' and the popularity of slogans such as 'down with the government of murderers' provides evidence of its anti-systemic orientation. The texts and declarations coming from the movement, exemplify this. See for example the following extract from the

declaration of the coordination of Student Assemblies: “The revolt of the youth is an expression of social anger against the politics that murder life, education and work, against the government that attacks the youth and at the same time is handing 28 billion euros to the banks” (Solomon and Palmieri (eds.) 2011: 236).

However, treating the social explosion of December 2008 as the expression of a post-proletarian ‘precariat’ (Xydakis 2008), or as the rising of the ‘Multitude’ (Gavriilidis 2009) following Negri’s theorization (Hardt and Negri 2000) can be misleading. Concerns about working conditions, job insecurity, and privatization of social goods, demands for better public education and more stable and decent jobs combined with a deep distrust of the political establishment, make this movement much less a ‘nomadic multitude’ and much more an advance viewing of a potential counter-hegemonic bloc of the subordinate classes.

The importance of the social and political dynamics of the December 2008 revolt was made obvious less than two years afterwards when Greece entered the prolonged cycle of protest and unrest that followed the beginning of the austerity programs. From the general strikes of 2010, 2011 and 2012, many of which also included violent confrontations with the police to impressive collective experiences of self-organization, horizontal coordination and mass protest such as the 2011 movement of the squares (Sotiris 2011a), one can see in many instances the importance not only of the collective experiences of protest during 2008, but also some of the networks of activism and coordination that were first seen in 2008.

A condensation of social tensions and systemic contradictions

One cannot explain the intensity and extent of the revolt without reference to the social tensions and systemic contradictions related to dominant policies of neoliberalism and capitalist restructuring. We are not suggesting that the December 2008 events are the simple result of the general social and economic trends. At the same time, we cannot theorize the events of December 2008 without taking into account these trends, without thinking about “social currents coursing beneath them and which carried them far beyond their singular precipitant, the killing of a 15-year-old student by the police” (Johnston and Seferiades 2012, 150). In the section that follows, we first look at these trends and then turn to police violence as a condensation and metonymy for all forms of discontent, in order to explain why the murder of a 15-year-old youth could trigger such a sequence of contentious practices. The importance of a broader set of systemic contradictions, having to do with employment prospects, workplace conditions, the crisis of education, is also evident in the discourses coming from the movement itself.

The first declaration of the Occupation of the Athens University of Economics and Finance, mainly by anarchist activists, exemplified this: “This particular state murder was the end of the line concerning the everyday violence and terror which are being suffered increasingly by big parts of the society, through the massive dismissals, the economic penury, the police power, the psychological

terror that is being delivered by the news of 8” (Assembly of the Occupation of the university of economics and business 2008). The Occupation of the headquarters of the General Confederation of Labour (GSEE) mainly by militants in radical trade union initiatives exemplified this articulation of workplace grievances with the protests against police violence. As one of the declarations coming from this Occupation stated: “We, manual workers, employees, jobless, temporary workers, local or immigrants, are not passive TV viewers. Since the murder of Alexandros Grigoropoulos on Saturday night we participate in the demonstrations, the clashes with the police, the occupations on the centre or the neighborhoods” (General Assembly of Insurgent Workers 2008). The declaration of the ‘Popular Assembly’ of the occupation of the Agios Dimitrios Town Hall insisted that part of the reasons for the revolt was the “everyday violence we face at work, at schools, in the fight for survival” (Occupation of the Agios Dimitrios Town Hall 2008). The first communiqué of the Occupation of Athens Law School also epitomized this conception.

The same government that implement politics of austerity for workers and at the same time offers 28 billion euros as bail-out for the banks, the same government that uses police as an answer to social inequality that it is creating, is the same government that following the policies of the PASOK governments, is drafting within the European Union framework anti-terrorist legislation against movements and militants, the murders and kidnaps immigrants in police stations, that arrests protesters that represses and penalizes workers’ struggles. It uses the judicial system to issue decisions that consider strikes illegal, that puts militants behind bars and that justify police violence and brutality. It is investing in fear and is intensifying the attack on all fronts (privatizations, pension reform, education, health, social rights). These are the policies that armed the hands of policemen and murdered a fifteen-year-old student (quoted in Solomon and Palmieri (eds.) 2011, 235-236).

Deterioration of employment prospects and the emergence of a common youth identity

Despite high growth rates from the mid 1990s up to 2007 (INE GSEE – ADEDY 2008), Greece has experienced high rates of youth unemployment and underemployment. According to Eurostat estimates the unemployment rate of young people (15-24) in Greece in 2008 was at 22.1% with the EU-27 average being at 15.4% and by the end of 2009 it had reached 27.5% with the EU-27 being at 20.3% (Eurostat 2009; Eurostat 2010). This was the beginning of an extreme rise of unemployment and especially youth unemployment. By 2013 unemployment had reached 27% and youth unemployment 64%. According to Karamesini (2009: 21) six years after graduation one out of three Higher Education graduates, two out of three secondary education graduates and one out of three compulsory education graduates have not found some form of stable employment. Those who manage to enter the labour market have to put up with low wages, part-time posts, working ‘off the books’, harassment by employers. Better qualifications do not necessarily lead to better employment

prospects. In the 20-24 and 25-29 age groups unemployment rates are higher among those with better educational qualifications, such as university degrees (Karamesini 2009: 21), following a trend observed across Southern Europe where leavers from upper secondary education and even higher education have at least equal unemployment rates with the least qualified (Gangl *et al.* 2003: 282). A large survey of the employment prospects of Greek university graduates (Karamesini 2008) has shown that many of them face flexible work forms and / or are obliged to accept positions different from their formal qualifications. A picture emerges of a 'unity in difference' (Karamesini 2009: 21) of Greek youth.

Despite the differences in educational level and social status between the different segments of youth (especially between those that leave school at the end of compulsory or secondary education, opting for vocational training and early entry into the workforce at manual or lower clerical posts, and those continuing to Higher Education), they all face the deterioration of employment prospects. Worsening of work conditions, higher unemployment and lower earnings for youths have been a constant feature of European social reality from the 1980s and 1990s. Young employees have a stronger presence in sectors with high employee turnover, temporary posts and part time jobs (Lefresne 2003) and youth is at the epicentre of the expansion of precarious forms of labour (Castel 2006). Whether we choose to see precariousness as the paradigmatic form of labour under capitalism (Neilson and Rossiter 2009) or not, it is obvious that young people are indeed facing a continuous deterioration of employment prospects.

Therefore, this deterioration of employment prospects for all segments of the Greek youth was surely one of the reasons for the reproduction of a rather unitary identity for youths in Greece. In their turn, these elements of a common collective youth identity in Greece have played an important role in the mobilization of all segments of youth in the December 2008 protests and the dynamic of these protests.

Education as social battleground

From the 1990s reforms have aimed at increasing access at post-secondary education and at the same time making sure that university degrees do not lead to guaranteed work prospects, bringing higher education closer to business interests and disciplining the student movement, in line with the so-called 'Bologna Process' (Katsikas and Sotiris 2003). This has led to successive waves of student unrest. In the 2000s the combination of a highly competitive system of entry exams for higher education –that requires tremendous amounts of studying and many extra hours of expensive tutorial courses– with the prospect of obtaining a university degree that will not lead to secure employment has produced a widespread feeling of growing insecurity as regards young people's prospects.

University reform is an aspect of a broader process of capitalist restructuring. Commodification and entrepreneurialization of higher education (Ovetz 1996; Slaughter and Lelslie 1997; Harvie 2000; edu-factory collective 2006) are

important aspects, but equally important are changes in the role of education in social reproduction. Educational reforms tend to 'internalize' the changes in the labour market and the capitalist labour process within the educational apparatus. This internalization and pre-inscription of the realities of capitalist production, this subsumption of education under the imperatives of capitalist accumulation, is not limited to changes in university funding. It takes the form of changes not only in the relative value of university degrees but to the very notion of the degree, leading to new fragmentations, educational hierarchies, processes of individualization that respond to the new realities of the workplace. It can also account for the emphasis on training instead of education, for the changes in curricula, for the emergence of an entrepreneurial culture in higher education, for the ideological projection of individualistic 'investment' in one's qualifications. In addition, it can explain why youths in the educational apparatus have a stronger than before perception of the realities and difficulties of the workplace. As experienced during the French student movement against the CPE (Contract of First Employment) in 2006 (Budgen 2011) or in recent Italian student movements (Bascetta and Vecchi 2011), students tend more easily to associate with the labour movement, to think in terms of common demands, to create forms of solidarity. New forms of linkages between higher education and capitalist production and the labour market, along with increased insecurity regarding employment prospects in a conjuncture marked by increased unemployed and precariousness (Calella 2011), can explain why student movements express both an increased apprehension of the struggles in the workplace and greater readiness to articulate broader demands. Recent student movements have not been just a reaction to the devaluation of degrees but are a part of greater social mobilization against the neoliberal 'restructuring of the totality of capital – labour relations' (Kouvelakis 2007: 279).

What emerges is a deeper contradiction facing modern capitalism because of the effort from the part of the forces of capital to have a more skilled labour force but with fewer rights, more productive but also more insecure, over-qualified and at the same time underpaid. The gulf between aspiration and reality and the fact that these segments of the workforce, (both as active and as future workers), not only are in a position to grasp this contradiction, but also have the communicative skills to transform their discontent into social demand, has given a new quality to the wave of student and more generally youth unrest in Europe in the second half of the 2000s. That is why, although the majority of the youths participating in the December movement were high school and university students, the grievances at the base of their discontent had also to do with the developments within capitalist production.

Regarding the Greek case we should note the importance of the impressive 2006-2007 movement by university students and professors against a wave of reforms that included changes in the status of university degrees that would de-link them from professional qualifications, harsher disciplinary measures, intensified study schedules, and an attempt to overturn the explicit constitutional ban on private universities (Dritsas and Kalampokas 2011). This movement produced a generation of student activists that were to play an important role during December 2008 (Lountos 2012).

Capitalist crisis and social tensions

The economic crisis was surely a contributing factor to a general feeling of discontent, marking the first stages of the whole sequence that led to the 'Greek debt crisis' and the austerity package enforced by the European Union, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund. In 2008 the Greek economy was already sliding into recession (Bank of Greece 2009) in sharp contrast to high growth rates and intense capitalist restructuring attested from the mid-1990s. Households were facing stagnant wages, job insecurity and rising indebtedness, compounded by a policy of strict fiscal austerity. Rising social inequality became an integral aspect of the Greek social landscape (Kouvélakis 2008). All these accentuated feelings of growing insecurity and a widespread sense that things were going to get worse in the next months. A few months after the December revolt a special Eurobarometer survey captured aspects of this social climate of dissatisfaction with the current situation and negative expectations for the future (*Eurostat* 2010a: 43-57). The evolution of the Greek economy after 2010 showed that 2008 was the beginning of a much deeper economic crisis that by 2013 had reached proportions that can only be compared to major warfare or the Great Depression of the 1930s, with a prolonged recession, a tremendous increase in unemployment and massive loss of income for the majority of society (INE-GSEE 2013).

Legitimization crisis

On the political level, rising social discontent was condensed in a wider sense of legitimization crisis of the Greek State and dominant policies (Bratsis 2009). The apprehension of widespread political corruption and direct links between business and the political system intensified these tendencies, and the same goes for the inability of the Greek State to deal with emergencies such as the devastating forest fires of 2007. Despite the fact that this did not take the form of an open 'systemic' political crisis, it surely contributed to the extent of the anger and protest in the streets of Athens in December 2008. The humiliating defeat of New Democracy in the 2009 general election also exemplified the extent of the discontent. The depth of the political crisis was made even more evident in subsequent years and especially the May 2012 election, the most impressive expression of dissatisfaction with the political system in recent Greek history (Mavris 2012).

Police violence in perspective

Police violence should not be seen as simply a contributing factor to the revolt of the Greek youth; it acted as a metonymy for the systemic social violence of capitalist restructuring and neoliberalism and as a catalyst for the expression of various forms of social and political discontent. Therefore, even though structural tendencies such as the ones discussed above were surely contributing factors to the eruption of process, it was such a display of police violence that acted as the critical event that not only triggered a whole sequence of

contentious practices but also offered a specific and clearly defined reason to act and protest.

An extreme case of police aggression, such as the murder, in cold blood, of 15-year-old Alexis Grigoropoulos, was perceived as the 'tip of the iceberg' of all forms of authoritarianism, aggression, social inequality, as the condensation of all forms of grievances, especially since police violence has also been an integral aspect of the turn towards the neoliberal security state (Belantis 2006; Kouvélakis 2010). The fact that Alexis Grigoropoulos was a high school student, from a middle-class family living in the suburbs, that he was out on a Saturday night with friends, in an Athens neighbourhood traditionally associated with youth culture and student radicalism, that was killed without provocation by a police officer, meant that all sections of Greek youth could identify with him and see its death as a totally unjustified display of state-imposed systemic violence. That is why from the beginning mourning and anger were mixed and fuelled the radicalization of protest, something that can account for the impressive rapid diffusion of the protests, including violent protests and the mass participation of all sections of the youth.

Therefore, a tendency to focus on the inability of the police to deal with youth protest or on the rituals of youth collective delinquency misses the point. Moreover, it is not enough to link hostility to the police with the historic association of police forces in Greece with state authoritarianism and constant persecution of left-wing and communist militants. By saying this we do not want to underestimate the fact that at the same time all sorts of militant and radical groups, collectivities and networks could immediately treat protests against this murder as a protest against all forms of attacks against youth and society. This was based upon the long tradition of political radicalism associated with youth movements in Greece, from the long-history of politicized student movements and the student Left to the anarchist and autonomous groups that never ceased to have a strong presence, along with forms of trade union militancy, the existence of experienced activist networks and strong traditions of defiance against the security forces including traditions of street clashes with riot police (Sotiris 2011; Kanellopoulos 2012; Lountos 2012). All these factors can explain the rapid diffusion of insurrectionary practices, from the immediate start of street clashes by radical left and anarchist militants during the night of the murder, to the mass presence of youth, union, left-wing and anarchist militants in the demonstrations the following day, to the impressive entrance of high school students into the stage and tremendous mass violence of the manifestations on Monday, 8 December 2008 (Kotronaki and Seferiades 2012).

Beyond a simple '*trahison des clercs*': explaining the inability of mainstream intellectuals to understand the movement

Simply observing the inability of mainstream theorists to grasp the significance of the December 2008 explosion is not enough. It is a symptom of underlying ideological displacements. In what follows we will focus on three aspects, the support given historically to projects of modernization from Greek intellectuals,

the gradual identification of the demand for 'modernization' with the neoliberal restructuring of Greek economy and society, and the current ideological crisis of mainstream social theory in Greece as part a broader tendency towards hegemonic instability after the exhaustion of the neoliberal paradigm.

Greek intellectuals and projects of modernization

The association of Greek intellectuals with projects of capitalist modernization has been particularly important. Modernization has been a key word in the evolution of Greek political culture in the past 4 decades. Political representatives from the entire political spectrum, the Right, the Centre (and later the socialist centre-Left) and even the Communist Left have formulated their respective political agendas as projects for the modernization of Greek Society. In the theoretical plane, it was the theorization of tendencies of underdevelopment and / or distorted development in Greek society (Tsoukalas 1977, 1983, 1986; Mouzelis 1978, 1986) that offered the necessary justification for the need for modernization. Moreover, from the 1960s to the 1980s, a basic tenet of the Greek Left has been the inability of the Greek bourgeoisie, because of its backward character and its dependence on foreign imperialism, to lead the process of modernization of Greek society. It was up to the people's movement to lead the way of both social modernization and of social emancipation. This earlier version of the demand for modernization (and development) facilitated a certain duality from the part of intellectuals in the 1970s and 1980s. On the one hand it helped proponents of such a position to be in touch with a climate of social and political radicalization, exemplified in the demand for 'change' articulated in socialist terms. On the other hand, it facilitated their role as 'organic intellectuals' of the state. It allowed them to make more articulate and sophisticated a historical transition already in motion, namely the transition of Greece to an advanced capitalist economy, to a European-style parliamentary democracy, to the establishment of welfare state institutions, and to the end of the 'state of exception' that was established after the Civil War (1946-1949).

Modernization as a break with the aspirations of the subordinate classes

The 1980s and early 1990s marked a turning point for Greek intellectuals and their commitment to projects of modernization. The gradual right-wing turn of PASOK towards political realism, the austerity program of 1985, and the beginning of the distancing between social demands and government measures evolved into a growing conflict between the social aspirations of the lower classes and projects of modernization. The project of modernization started to incorporate elements of the emerging neoliberal policy consensus (privatization, retreat of the state, market accountability of public institutions). The change of the conjuncture also changed the connotations of the appeal to modernization. In the 1970s and early 1980s, the appeal to modernization was combined with elements of a radical-popular ideology that included anti-imperialism, an

emphasis on struggle and resistance, high valuing of collective goods and the public sector.

After the mid-1980s, we witnessed a turn towards a new set of values that included individualism, consumerism, and high valuing of wealth (Voulgaris 2008: 337). However, large segments of the subordinate classes remained faithful to aspects of the 'Metapolitefsi' ideology. Consequently, the appeals of public intellectuals towards the necessary modernization of Greek society started to incorporate a rupture with the ideological, social and political practices of the subordinate classes. It was then that the accusation of populism became commonplace in political and theoretical interventions, referring to the attitudes and practices by the working class and large segments of traditional petty bourgeois strata that insisted on secure employment, income redistribution, state intervention in the economy. For the first time the main enemy of the modernizing project is not the bourgeoisie or imperialism but the subordinate classes themselves. The 1989 collapse of 'actually existing socialism' acted as a catalyst for this process of political and theoretical transformation.

Nikiforos Diamantouros (1994) epitomized this position in a text that became a reference point for many writers. Diamantouros reformulated the cultural dualism thesis that had been commonplace in the discussion of Greek political culture. While adhering to the description of two cultures, one originating in the experience of Ottoman rule and the other in the encounter with European Enlightenment, he suggested that the post-1974 form of the more traditional or backward political culture was what he defined as the 'underdog' political culture. This culture comprised a 'levelling egalitarianism [...] a compensatory sense of justice [...] a profound diffidence towards capitalism and the market operation' (Diamantouros 1994: 38). It is obvious that we are dealing here with a semantic and ideological shift, where instead of referring to pre-modern traditionalism the problem is located in the anti-capitalist political and social reflexes of the subordinate classes and their endorsement of political projects of social justice, redistribution and social protection.

The momentum of the demand for modernization was not only theoretical but also political. Costas Simitis, a self-proclaimed modernizer in PASOK, and himself a theorist of the need for 'modernization' (Simitis 1989, 1992, 1992a, 1995), was the winner of the succession race that followed the resignation, due to health problems, of Prime Minister A. Papandreou in 1995. It was at that time that the appeal to 'modernization', in the sense of complying with capitalist norms expressed in the process of European integration, became dominant in the public discourse (Sakellaropoulou and Sotiris 2004). The participation of intellectuals and social theorists in the development of specific policy initiatives, the new research landscape and the growing importance of programs funded by the European Union, and the need to ideologically legitimize 'reforms' (the new catchword for apologists of capitalist modernization), all these facilitated the emergence of a new consensus among Greek mainstream intellectuals in the 1990s and 2000s, regardless of their political denomination.

In this consensus, modernization meant the identification of democracy with parliamentary procedure, the distrust of radical social movements, viewing as

essentially conservative all demands that were in contrast to neoliberal economic orthodoxy, and the acceptance of the market as a vector of social rationality. The fact that most of these intellectuals opposed the nationalist trend of the 1990s and the subsequent short-lived attempt of the Greek Orthodox Church for a more openly political intervention, was self-proclaimed as element of their progressive position, despite their alignment with the prevailing policy consensus. However, the demand for modernization, although dominant in the public sphere and discourse, especially when coupled with the appeal to Europeanization, was never fully hegemonic in the collective self representation of the lower classes, leading to dualisms and contradictions in Greek political culture (Voulgaris 2008a).

If we want to understand why mainstream theorists had such a difficulty in dealing with December 2008 as a social movement, we must pay particular attention to the theoretical and ideological displacements surrounding the demand for modernization. The identification of modernization with neoliberal orthodoxy led to a very particular reaction towards social movements that opposed neoliberalism and processes of capitalist restructuring. This reaction was not simply hostile – this would follow a trend observed in most advanced capitalist social formations. The crucial point was that social movements were considered as inherently parochial and backward, representing interests and practices that can impede progress. This is in sharp contrast even to the positivist tradition that reluctantly left room for the ‘functional rebel’ (Durkheim) or ‘rebellion’ (Parsons, Merton) or openly admitted the importance of conflict (Dahrendorf). This inability to treat social resistances as forms of social conflict, requiring theoretical comprehension, leads to this theoretical impasse. Treating social contention and conflict as obstacles to an inescapable road to progress, leaves no room for analysis, assessment of dynamics and search for underlying causal mechanisms.

From the mid 1990s onwards student, worker and peasant movements have been treated as examples of a parochial mentality. This was particularly evident during the continuous cycle of student and university unrest in 2006-2007. At that crucial moment and despite the fact that students were facing police aggression, the majority of the intellectuals discussed above opted to offer their support to the government – even though most of them did not have affiliations to the then ruling New Democracy Party – in the name of the necessary modernization and reform of universities (Lazarides 2008). It was then that the repertoire of treating youth movements as forms of deviance and delinquency became the norm of mainstream theorists.

Crisis of hegemony and the impasse of mainstream intellectuals

However, treating the reaction of mainstream Greek intellectuals towards the December movement simply as the result of their support for projects of capitalist modernization is not enough. We must also look at the ideological and political conjuncture. This inability to comprehend a social movement and to perceive it not as a form of deviance but as an actual movement is an expression of deeper ideological displacements and contradictions. These contradictions

signal the exhaustion of the hegemonic potential of the dominant discourse on modernization and 'reform' in a period of rising social tensions and conflicts and consequently hegemonic instability.

In the second half of the 2000s, after the end of the artificial euphoria orchestrated around the Olympic Games, Greek society witnessed rising social inequalities, tensions, and confrontations. The impressive student and teacher movements of the 2006-2007, the confrontation around the reform of the pension system in 2007, and the rise of a new wave of trade union activism, especially in sectors where job precariousness was predominant, were manifestations of these tensions and the same goes for the rise of left-wing formations, especially in the 2007 general election. Greece was becoming a more unequal and socially polarized country. In 2007, the 'at risk of poverty' rate was at 20%, higher than the EU average, the top 20% of the population (in terms of disposable income) received 6 times as much of the total income of the bottom 20%, and the Gini coefficient of income inequality distribution was at 34 higher than the EU-27 average at 31 (*Eurostat 2010a*). There was the gradual exhaustion of what one might describe as the Greek developmental paradigm. This was based upon capitalist restructuring, cheap labour, constant flow of EU funds and the growth of sectors that are very sensitive to the tendencies of the general economic conjuncture, such as tourism, shipping and construction and experienced, without ever successfully solving a problem of competitiveness that was accentuated by the monetary and financial architecture of the Eurozone.

The growing distrust by large segments of the electorate of the political establishment reflected a more general inability of the neoliberal project to be hegemonic in the positive sense of actually gaining active consent from the subordinate classes. This meant that the political scene was becoming more alienated from the working class and large segments of the 'middle class', leading to a political cycle where the party that came to power gained more from the discontent against the policies of its predecessor than from the positive appeal of its program. At the same time, no alternative strategy has emerged in order to deal with growing social tensions and inequalities. On the contrary, both at the national and at EU level a 'fuite en avant' tactic of even more aggressive neoliberal reforms became dominant. This entrenchment of the political system and the economic elites also had ideological repercussions in the form of a return to an authoritarian and conservative emphasis on 'security' and 'law and order'. The erosion of the hegemonic and integrating ability of the State in most advanced capitalist social formations vis-à-vis the subordinate classes can explain the rise of the 'Security State', which aims at disarming the subordinates from any possibility to comprehend the reasons for their discontent and at directing their anger against stigmatized minorities (Kouvélakis 2010).

The full manifestation of the economic crisis did not change this systemic entrenchment around a policy of even more aggressive neoliberal policy despite the obvious failure of neoliberal market orthodoxy. This situation can be described as a strategic impasse from the part of the political and economic

elites. It was obvious, that more social tensions and even social explosions lay ahead, exemplified in the 2010-2012 sequence of protest and contention. However, what we have been witnessing an almost complete inability of the political system to think of an alternative other than successive 'shock and awe' waves of reforms, by means of draconian EU-ECB-IMF packages, aiming at complete demoralization of the subordinate classes, a bet far from safe as the persistence of mass movements and explosive social and political dynamics protests since 2010 has shown. On the contrary mass protest and social political contention brought Greece close to what Gramsci described as an 'organic crisis' and 'crisis of hegemony' (Gramsci 1971: 210-11; Kouvelakis 2011: 24-27). Therefore, the inability of mainstream intellectuals to comprehend the dynamics of the December 2008 movement is not simply a theoretical deficiency, but exactly an aspect of a tendency towards a crisis of hegemony.

To explain this inability we can turn to Poulantzas' insistence that the State 'both through apparatuses specialized in the qualification and training of labour power [...] and through the totality of its apparatuses (bourgeois and petty-bourgeois political parties, the parliamentary system, cultural apparatuses, the press and media)' (Poulantzas 2000: 60), plays an instrumental role in the division between manual and intellectual labour, knowledge production and in the articulation of hegemonic discourses. Following Gramsci, Poulantzas insists that this process requires a distinctive corps of 'state-enrolled intellectuals [that] are formally distinct from the bourgeoisie but play a role in organizing its hegemony' (Poulantzas 2000: 61). Consequently, a crisis of strategy or a crisis in the ability of the State to produce hegemonic discourses, can also take the form of this inability of 'organic intellectuals' to actually produce knowledge of the conjuncture. It is not that they have not been not aware of the possibility of social explosions. They are unable to treat them as social phenomena that require comprehension, because this would also mean articulating possible policy changes and class compromises, something precluded in advance in the dominant discourse. Thus, this whole conception of these movements as dangerous obstructions and forms of deviance, which entail the danger of generalized anomie and a complete breakdown of order, a conception that necessarily implies that the only way to deal with them is through disciplinary practices and technologies. Therefore, the ideological displacement of mainstream Greek intellectuals is also an aspect of a more general crisis of capitalist strategy (and consequently 'pro-systemic' social theory) in a period of hegemonic instability.

Instead of viewing the December 2008 movement as the symptom of an incomplete political modernization, or as a backward, corporatist reaction to progress, we must describe it as the eruption of all the conflicts and violence associated with capitalist modernization. As Stathis Kouvelakis (2008) has observed, contrary to the tendency of Western media to depict the December 2008 riots as evidence of Greece's incomplete transition to modernity, we must see them as the result of the advanced stage of neoliberal reforms in Greece.

Conclusion

The December 2008 explosion of Greek youth presents a very important challenge for radical social theory. It belongs to a cycle of protest and discontent against dominant neoliberal policies, which is far from over. On a more general socio-theoretical level one is obliged to treat it as a highly original *event* (Galanopoulos *et al.* 2008; Douzinas 2009; Vergetis 2010). The inability of mainstream Greek intellectuals and social theorists to comprehend its dynamics and their insistence on treating as some form of deviance can only be explained through their historical attachment to projects of capitalist modernization and a more general pattern of a crisis of dominant strategy with repercussions in mainstream social theory. Radical social theory must answer this challenge, and attempt to come in terms with the theoretical and political exigencies of such movements.

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