

A glimpse into the elsewhere

Recounted by an anarchist who ventured there for a moment in December 2008



From the moment that 14 year old Alexis Grigoropoulos was gunned down by a patrolling policeman on December 6 2008, the morphology of Greece's capital city and many others, both on the mainland and in many of the islands, changed. The force of the people's anger against the State and its paid killers expressed itself with limpid clarity: Athens, a European metropolis, had no cop station left untouched, no bank left functioning. Huge stores, banks and public buildings were gutted by fire and hundreds of luxury cars and car showrooms went up in flames, as the streets were blocked off with flaming barricades and hundreds of police in riot gear were forced to run away from the rebels.

It is impossible to render what happened over there in words, because what took place was a social rebellion, where the outward face of capitalist society came under assault by massive numbers of disparate people, acting as one.

Anarchists who had been in the thick of the rebellion around the Polytechnic in Athens were visibly overwhelmed. Stunned by the events, their eyes shining with passion and wonder, they were the first to admit that they had lived moments that they had never imagined even in their wildest dreams, and which had completely surpassed them.

Many words have been written about these days, beautiful words, reproduced and diffused in many languages. But it seemed that something was missing...

This candid account (transcribed as spoken) by an anarchist comrade who suddenly found himself acting in a completely different terrain to that with which he was familiar, and the fears and questions that this awakened in him, is a valuable testimony that opens up many questions for all anarchists. J.W.

The evening of December 6 2008 I was at home preparing for one of my usual Saturday nights. Then a friend called me on the phone telling me that something very bad had happened, cops in Exarchia had killed somebody. I made some phone calls, some of my friends didn't know and some had already heard. Like them, we immediately went to the Polytechnic school. It took a little time before clashes began around it. After some hours some of my comrades and I decided to carry out an attack on a police station in the centre of Athens. It was important for us to do this at that time. We made an appointment in a busy area of Athens where we could be hidden inside the crowd after the attack. As a friend and I were walking towards the place of the appointment we encountered a spontaneous demo of a few hundred leftist people who are not normally seen clashing with the police, ready to attack. The head of the demo stopped to ask us what was going on at the Polytechnic because they wanted to go there. We told them that it might be difficult as there were some police units around, then left, each in their own direction. I was struck by the look in their eyes, something very strange for them, because I know them well. It was anger and a readiness to clash with the police, not just anger but the urgency to clash with the police. These guys are people that usually fight with the anarchists on the issue of clashing or not clashing with the police, always in favour of the latter. The look on their faces was in contradiction with their whole appearance as Greek leftist students with their carefully trimmed beards and spectacles.

We went to the appointment. We were about 100 people, which is not the usual number for a group that wants to attack a police station. It would normally be 12 to 20. We attacked the police station with molotovs and stones. We didn't do all that much real damage as it was a spontaneous action and not well planned. We continued by smashing and burning luxury shops and chain stores before returning to the crowded area we started off from.

I went back to the Polytechnic school where clashes with police were continuing and someone called me from the law school telling me that there were also clashes there. The leftists we had met before had obviously ended up there. I remember that when I was on the road from to the Polytechnic, despite the fact that there were clashes around, we didn't feel the sense of fear and anxiety one normally has in such situations.

At the school of law there were also clashes with the police but I think that there was a different sense. The attacks on the police were maybe more amateur than at the Polytechnic but definitively this was more a mass situation. Even the insults exchanged with the police were different, more sophisticated.

A few hours later I returned to the Polytechnic and tried to get some sleep as it was nearly morning. I didn't manage to sleep of course and I think that it was at that moment that I began to realise what had actually happened with this young comrade who had been shot. At that moment the human tragedy that had occurred suddenly hit me and I cried. Eventually I managed to doze off for a couple of hours and when I woke up, because of all these thoughts, I was even angrier than before.

Sunday's demo saw several thousand people and we began to move up Alexandras Avenue towards the police headquarters of Athens. Very soon clashes began and as always many shops and banks were set on fire.

The clashes with the police that day were very hard, we exchanged an unimaginable hail of stones with the police and they discharged huge amounts of teargas upon us. The anger and lack of sleep had left me totally out of control. I was wounded by a stone and ended up in hospital for some stitches. The friend who had come with me to the hospital phoned me later telling me that there were a lot of clashes around Athens in some normal areas as well as around the school of economics and other schools.

Next day, Monday, I didn't go to work. A friend called me on the phone to tell me that some school pupils had attacked the police headquarters of Pireus, the port of Athens. Later I heard that there had been another attack in Pireus against a police station and from that moment I began to receive information about many attacks on police stations in very ordinary parts of Athens and all over Greece. Even then I had not realised what was going on. I met my father some time later and he had seen the attack on the police headquarters of Pireus while at work. He told me laughing that the pupils had overturned the police cars and smashed the facade of the building and there were ordinary people around clapping their hands.

Like some of my friends, I was considering not going on the afternoon demo, thinking that nothing much would happen there. I decided to go at the last moment and arrived just a few minutes before it began. When I came out of the metro station I saw a huge crowd, thousands of people, tens of thousands, some say between 30 and 40 thousand. There was already a burning barricade in a side street, and some young people were clashing with a police unit. As soon as the demo began—but rather than a demo, it was a crowd, a great mass of angry people—some people began to smash and loot the shops, any shops. At first some people tried to stop them but very soon the situation was chaotic with buildings, shops, everything set on fire, even a big hotel which was something that made me feel very scared, thinking there would be people trapped inside.

Despite the fact that I'm used to violent events, and not as an observer, all that was happening all of a sudden was not quite compatible with my anarchist mentality. The people around me were totally unknown, again something that was unusual for me.

When I reached Omonia Square right in the centre of Athens, many people were trying to set fire to a very central prestigious building of the national bank of Greece where a woman was trapped inside. Other people were moving towards Omonia police station to attack it, everything burning and being looted all around us. I met two women anarchist comrades that I don't know very well. But we were the only people who knew each other there and they asked me what I suggested doing because, as they told me, they were not sure if they really wanted to be there. I told them that I couldn't answer because I felt the same way.

As the chaos continued a police unit attacked the crowd very aggressively from one side, discharging a lot of teargas, while leftwing people were desperately trying to retain a sense of demo amidst this chaos. At that moment the crowd was trapped in a thick cloud of gas, the situation was very dangerous. Thankfully the crowd managed to spread out and disperse and I, on reaching Syntagma square, found other masses of people going in different directions in crowds. Then some demonstrators set fire to the huge Christmas tree in the big square in front of the Greek parliament. From this moment, because of this incident, the slogan 'Christmas has been cancelled this year' was born and the image of the burning tree has gone around the world giving joy to many. But at that precise moment I felt the same fear that I felt when I saw huge buildings burning, some with people inside them. The fear wasn't for my personal security but, as I see myself as part of the Greek anarchist movement, I was afraid that after all this it might be impossible to be an anarchist in Greece as I was before, that the movement couldn't bear the weight of what might happen.

In Syntagma square some police units tried to regain control of the situation, attacking the mass and trying to arrest people. I saw a young girl being arrested, I ran towards the police unit not knowing exactly what I wanted to do, and then I realised that I was almost rounded up by another police unit running towards me. I saw a few other people behind me doing the same thing. Thankfully I managed to run through the police unit as did the others behind me, except perhaps one that I couldn't do anything about.

Later I found a friend of mine and we decided to go towards the School of Law which was close to us and we knew that there were some riots around it. The burning and smashing hadn't stopped around the city centre. We went to the School of Law where opposite a large historic building was up in flames. Later on we learned was the library of the School of Law. The size of the fire was so great that it was terrifying. It was not the only building in Athens in this situation. Going up on to the roof of the School of Law we saw the smoke of all the buildings that were burning in the centre of Athens. The fires had created a great glow, like a livid sunset over the city. We suddenly heard a very loud noise coming from the burning building opposite - maybe a part of its roof had collapsed.

A friend called me from the Polytechnic. He's a comrade who is always very eager to be involved in riots and burning. He told me that there were so many riots around the Polytechnic that he was tired, and that I could not imagine what was going on there. I went later to the Polytechnic, the riots had calmed down but everything around had been burned and looted. A five-storey building near the school had been burnt to the ground.

I found a very good friend and comrade at the side entrance to the Polytechnic. I noticed that he was completely alone, sitting staring into space. He told me that he was very disappointed that he had lost the demo; I replied that I was not so sure that he would really have liked to have been there. He asked me why and I told him that they had burnt and destroyed things like the Law School library and that the situation was totally out of control. He told me that the same happened there and that he and some of his comrades had tried to prevent people from looting shops, which they saw as out of the context of the reason for the anger, the murder of a young boy in Exarchia.

Then I saw and heard something very strong that was to repeat itself constantly over the days to come: young people gathered behind a barricade of burnt cars screaming slogans at the police, using the burnt-out cars as drums. I saw an amazing image of a guy standing on top of a car in front of a big fire, arms and legs open, his silhouette etched by the flames.

From that day on the people who came to the Polytechnic were not exactly anarchists but young and very young people, a lot of them immigrants, some junkies and also some 'emo' kids maybe from the better-off areas of Athens, a mixture that had also been present in the demo earlier.

Over recent years the road outside the Polytechnic has been the scene of many street battles with the riot police. For the first two days following Alexi's murder those fighting were still mainly anarchists, possibly in the widest sense, but still anarchists or at least people of the antagonist movement. Many, many comrades who until these days had never lifted a stone were involved in fighting the police. Leftists whose negative attitude towards riots or clashes with the police had until then monopolised our encounters with them were in many cases involved, and sometimes passionately, in the clashes.

On Monday, the third day, this changed. A mixture of young people but also many other people impossible to categorise became the driving force. Many anarchists were embarrassed by this situation. The violence that these people were releasing surpassed the limits of the mainstream anarchist mentality. These limits were faithfully adhered to by the school of economics occupation close by, predominantly occupied by anarchists without the presence of the 'rabble'. In fact, the Polytechnic came to be referred to as 'Bagdad', whereas the ASOEE (school of Economics) was 'Switzerland'.

The ASOEE became the centre of many discussions and also actions which also gave ideas for the publishing of a lot of stuff. In my opinion, all these discussions, actions and published stuff remained within the limits of the typical anarchist mentality - maybe in a wider and improved sense, but always inside these limits, determined by the character of the crowd that was gathering in the ASOEE, which was an anarchist, or in the wider sense a movement-involved crowd at the time when in the Polytechnic school something different and new was happening.

The Polytechnic school was a place where a mass of many different people gathered: very young people, school students, some 'emo' style maybe from wealthier families, simultaneously with first and second generation immigrants, many of whom didn't speak Greek, many people who couldn't be specifically categorised, and inside this confusion of hundreds, sometimes thousands, of people there was a minority of anarchists desperately trying to retain some political character in the occupation.

In ASOEE there were some stories going around about dealings - drugs - or comrades who were violently trying to prevent looting in the surrounding area. These stories may or may not have been true, or were exaggerated, but they are characteristic of the image that people in ASOEE had of the Polytechnic school.

It has been common for riots or violent clashes to take place outside the Polytechnic from 1973 onwards, since the insurrection on Nov 17. If something very important happens, it's to be expected that everybody will go there, but it's not so common to go to ASOEE. Maybe the fact that so many anarchists went to ASOEE indicates the unwillingness of the main body of the Greek anarchist movement to be involved with this 'rabble'. In my opinion, this also shows our inability to surpass our limits and to be able to adjust to an unknown and unpredictable situation.

This situation in the occupied schools lasted from the 6th of December until the Christmas holidays. In a way, Christmas had come to be seen as a kind of closure, not only due to some clear fall in the level of the situation, but also as a kind of expectation from the main body of anarchists, particularly in the ASOEE.

What happened to all those people that we the anarchists encountered all these days of December? Some of the Greek students were incorporated into the main body of the anarchists, but all the others, immigrants, 'scum', or just masses of uncategorised people simply vanished into urban anonymity. We didn't see them, or maybe we didn't want to see them, again.

For many anarchists December was a success in quantitative terms.

For a few, it opened up a glimpse into the elsewhere.

Maybe these days revealed our incapacity to encounter new possibilities.

Elephant Archives

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