

The Athens Polytechnic Uprising: Myth and Reality

Marianthi Kotea

Department of Sociology

Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences

Athens-Greece

Abstract

The following text investigates how specific urban places, such as buildings, squares or streets, become symbols of contestation of established order. It uses as study case the Athens Polytechnic uprising and focuses on how and why the main building of the National Technical University of Athens (Polytechnio) and the surrounding area at Exarchia became symbol of resistance against tyranny and foreign dependence. The investigation is concentrated on three topics: a) the meaning of the ritual which has been established by the celebration of the event over the years, b) the circumstances which allowed the historical event to become not only symbol of the struggle against dictatorship but also emblem for anarchism and for terrorism, c) the delayed recognition of the Greek people's Resistance against dictatorship by the Parliament. The outcome of the investigation is that the polytechnic uprising was established as symbol of resistance by the entire Greek Left, though socialists, communists and anarchists don't share the same visions. Eventually the event was established as a national holiday by the Greek Parliament after a 26-year-delay, that is in 1999 26th August. At that time the left ideology was a spent force for the majority of Youth, which didn't threaten the economic and social status quo any more. Nowadays unfortunately the visions of the polytechnic uprising for freedom, democracy, national independence, progress and social justice seem to be the solution of current crisis...

Keywords: revolutionary place-making, urban space, riots, political changeover, symbol of resistance, Exharhia, anarchism, terrorism, memory politics, commemoration festivities, national holiday

1. A brief chronicle of the events

In 1973, between 14th and 17th of November an uprising took place within the precinct of The National Technical University of Athens (Polytechnio) and the neighboring streets of Exarchia. At the beginning, the students of Polytechnio held several meetings in the main building in an attempt to make a decision on how to protest against the dictatorial government which had postponed the student's election until next year. But in fact, what started as a meeting ended up in an uprising against the dictatorship (the Junta of the Colonels) and its foreign supporters (USA and NATO), as the students of all Athenian universities resolved to be confined in the main building of Polytechnio. At the same time, they constructed a radio station and started calling upon Athenians to reinforce their movement.

In the meantime, dictator Georgios Papadopoulos, realizing the strong support of the people and the militancy of the rebels, ordered the chief of the armed forces to suppress the rebellion. At 03.30 a.m. on Saturday 17th of November 1973 a tank pulled down the central gate of Polytechnio and crushed the protestors, who were perched on it singing the national anthem and waving the national flag. Then the army along with the police force got into the main building of Polytechnio, beat and arrested whoever they bumped into. At that time many people were tortured and some were killed. A week later (25th of November) a new dictator, Demetrios Ioannides (who was the chief of military police), took over and the regime became more ruthless. Eventually on 24th July 1974 the dictatorship collapsed, after the failure of the coup against the President of Cyprus Makarios (15th July 1974)¹ and the invasion of the Turkish army on the island (20th July 1974).

¹ The coup was instigated by the dictator Ioannides, who wanted to overthrow Makarios' government in order to impose his own resolution on Cyprus question. The coup gave the chance to Turkey, who was guarantor of the status quo, to invade on the island. England and Greece were also guarantors of Cyprian regime.

The military turned the government over to Constantinos Karamanlis who returned from France (where he lived self-exiled) for this reason. The period of the political changeover (known as metapolitefsis) had begun. Karamanlis formed a government of national unity which brought the administration and the army under the political control, legalized the Communist Party² and prepared the country for the first free elections, which took place in the first anniversary of the polytechnic uprising (on Sunday 17th November 1974). New parties appeared: PASOK (Panhellenic Socialist Movement) under the leadership of Andreas Papandreou, Nea Demokratia (New Democracy) under the leadership of Karamanlis, Center Union-New Forces (Enossi Kentrou-Nees Denamis) under Georgios Mavros and National Democratic Union (Ethniki Demokratiki Enossi) which supported the former dictators.³ In December (8.12.1974) a referendum on regime was held and the Royal Democracy was abolished. Until June 1975 (7.6.1975) a new Constitution was voted; the second Hellenic Republic was borne.⁴

2. The commemoration over the years: the ritual and its meaning

The first anniversary of the uprising couldn't be commemorated on 17th of November 1974 as on this day the first free elections were scheduled by the Prime-Minister Karamanlis. So, the leftists and anarchists commemorated the event in 15th of November with a protest march against the state and the capital. And a week after the election (24.11.1974) a second march took place that was organized by the National Union of Greek Students (E.F.E.E.). One million citizens participated in this march which was a manifestation of the anti-fascist and of the anti-imperialist will of the people and it reached up to the American Embassy.

In 1975 the socialist party (PASOK) proposed to the government that the anniversary of the polytechnic uprising should be commemorated as a national celebration because of the significance of the event for the contemporary Greek history. But the government of Karamanlis instead of accepting this proposal celebrated the restoration of democracy on 24th of July at the Presidential Mansion.⁵ Nevertheless, the opposition parties, that is the socialist and the two communist parties along with their students' organizations, the trade unions and the social associations concluded to establish the commemoration of the uprising because the event was already a symbol of resistance against tyranny and a symbol of independence of the foreign rule for the Greek people and especially for the Youth. For that reason, a ritual of commemoration has been established through the years:

- A. Every year the commemoration of the event is organized by a committee which is constituted by the University Authorities of Polytechnio, the National Union of Greek Students, the Association of Imprisoned and Deportee Resisters of period 1967-1974, the Greek General Confederation of Greek Workers, the Progressive Union of Greek Mothers, the Parents' Federation of Athens and the syndicalist unions of teachers in primary and secondary education schools.
- B. The commemoration takes three days (15-16-17 November) although the event had lasted four days and three nights. During these three days several festivities take place which intend to disclose the meaning and the moral of the uprising especially to the young people who haven't got the painful experience of a tyranny. Of course, the place of all festivities is the main building of Polytechnio.

² The Greek government outlawed the Communist Party in 1947, after the outbreak of the Civil War (1946-1949). In 1968 the Greek Communist Party split up into two wings; a) the Greek Communist Party (KKE) which accepted the ideological and political leadership of the Soviet Union's Communist Party and b) the Greek Communist Party Interior (KKE Essoterikou) which argued for the parity among the communist parties. However, the two communist parties participated in the first free elections of metapolitefsis as a bloc under the name of The United Left (Enomemi Aristera).

³ Of course these political parties weren't totally new because their staff was related to some degree to the parties of the pre-dictatorial period.

⁴ The first Hellenic Republic spanned the period 1924-1936.

⁵ The first elected President of Hellenic Republic was voted by the Greek parliament in 19th June 1975.

- C. The precinct of National Technical University of Athens plays an important role in the commemorative services. A monument was made by the Greek sculpture Memos (Agamemnon) Makris⁶ which is a bronze head of a young man⁷ lying in the surroundings of the university and is dedicated to the rebel students of Polytechnio. The destroyed, by the tank, central gate is placed next to the monument every year. Flowers and wreaths are laid on these monuments by the people, students and politicians visit the main building in order to pay homage to the “heroes” of Polytechnio. Most of the flowers are red carnations, which are a communist symbol of great importance; it reminds to the older people Nikos Beloyannis who was executed along with three other communists as a spy in 1952. Beloyannis was holding a fresh red carnation every day in his trial and that’s the reason that he was called “the carnation man”.⁸ At the same time political slogans and songs are transmitted by loudspeakers; these slogans and songs intend to reconstruct the circumstances of the uprising and to remind to the people the demands of the students. “Bread, education, freedom” is the slogan which condenses, more than any other, the aims of the polytechnic uprising.
- D. The commemorative services culminate on the last day, the 17th of November, which was the day that a tank pulled down the university’s central gate. On this day, a ceremony takes place that concerns the reading of a list which includes the names of 88 people who lost their lives while they were fighting dictatorship. The list has been made out by the Progressive Union of Greek Mothers along with the Association of Imprisoned and Deportee Resisters of period 1967-1974. Among these 88 names, which are called out every year, there are 50 victims of the polytechnic uprising. Unfortunately, only the identity of 16 of them is known according to the first official historical research.⁹

The ceremony is finished up with a march which passes through the main streets of Athens in order to end up at the American Embassy. The bloodstained national flag, the unique symbol of the uprising, which the tank pulled down as well, leads the way to the final destination. Students carry the flag of Polytechnio. These students are members of university organizations that represent the views of centrist and left-wing political parties (PASOK, KKE, KKE Interior) since many rebels supported the socialist and communist ideas in those days.¹⁰

The march towards American Embassy declares the Greek people’s will to shake off the foreign interference in the country’s government. Foreign interference was established after the Second World War when the U.S.A. had taken advantage of the American aid¹¹ to Greece with the purpose to intervene in the Greek Civil War so as to help the centrist and the right-wing political forces and its National Army to win the Greek Communist Party and its Greek Democratic Army (Demokratikos Stratos Elladas).

⁶ Agamemnon Makris (1913-1993) was a Greek sculpture of 20th century, he participated in the Greek Resistance against the German occupation in the Second World War, he deported from France in 1950 because of his communist political convictions and he lived as a political refugee in Hungary, where he became one of the famous sculptures of the socialist realism. In 1975 he took back the Greek citizenship which was taken away in 1964. The bronze head was placed at the outdoor university premises when Georgios Voudouris was elected rector of Polytechnio (1984-1985, 1985-1986).

⁷ The head of the young man is the Greek Marxist Historian Nikos Svoronos (1911-1989), who also participated in the Greek Resistance during the Second World War, he was professor at École Pratique des Hautes Études and he had also his Greek citizenship taken away in 1955 which he took back after the restoration of democracy in 1975. Svoronos and Makris were friends and comrades.

⁸ The international public opinion asked the Greek government not to execute the death penalty. Charles de Gaulles, Charlie Chaplin, Jean Paul Sartre, Paul Eluard, Jean Cocteau, Nazim Hikmet and Pablo Picasso were some of the famous intelligentsia and artists who supported this request. Picasso in particular expressed his emotion by sketching “the carnation man”.

⁹ This research was organized and realized by the National Institution of Research (E.I.E.) and its first results were presented by the Director of E.I.E. Leonidas Kallivretakis in the inset “Postman” (Tachydromos) of the newspaper “The News-Weekend” (Ta Nea-Savatokyriako) in 15th of November 2003. According to Kallivretakis there are 23 eponymous and 16 anonymous dead of the polytechnic uprising.

¹⁰ Of course, not every student who participated in the uprising was a member of these parties. Some of them weren’t members on any political party (known as antifascist and democrat students) and others identified themselves as politically unorganized lefts. Also there were the leftists who fought not only the dictatorship but also the capitalist system itself. All these students, regardless of their political differences, were the protagonists in the event.

¹¹ That is the Truman Doctrine (1947) and the Marshal Plan (1948-1952).

However the U.S.A. government and its Intelligence Service continued to interfere into the political developments by imposing even the majority electoral system in order to establish a Greek administration ready to serve America's interests.¹² And of course when democracy was overthrown by the dictatorship, after the political crisis among the years 1963-1967, most European countries broke off their relationship with Greece but not the United States. As it was expected this position caused the Greek people's reaction against the U.S.A. That's why the slogans "Down with the U.S.A." and "Down with the NATO" were heard during the polytechnic uprising.¹³ And that's why after metapolitefsis the march to the American Embassy has been established. Nowadays, the relationship between the U.S.A. and the Greek government has changed but anti-Americanism still exist because of America's foreign policy.

3. The uprising as an emblem for anarchism and for terrorism

3.1. Exharhia: a haunt of leftists and anarchists

Unfortunately, every celebration of the commemoration days of the polytechnic uprising becomes the core of a war of statements referring to the significance of the historical fact among the political parties and among the students' organizations. Almost every year the last day's march ends up in violent clashes of the leftists and anarchists with the police in the neighboring streets of Exharhia, while quite often the extremists barricade themselves in the main building and from there they invoke the university asylum in order to avoid arresting. After that damages and even casualties in some anniversaries is the depressing report of the commemoration.¹⁴ In fact all the above have been part of the ritual.

So, why the memory of an event which is admittedly considered to be the foundation stone of the political changeover causes such a dispute and troubles? The war of statements among the political parties and among the students' organizations relates mainly to the following issues: a) what is the content that the parties put into the rebels demands for freedom, democracy, national independence, progress and social justice, b) which policy the parties think materializes those demands and c) whether the visions of polytechnic uprising have already been fulfilled. The two big parties (Nea Demokratia and PASOK) which alternated in power from 1974 till nowadays think that most of the visions of the "polytechnic generation" are fulfilled. On the contrary the left-wing parties argue that there are still changes to be done in every field of the Greek society.

But the true problem in contemporary Greece is that the polytechnic uprising became an excuse for emerging extremist activities and even worst terrorism. The causes of extremism are connected to the fact that among the rebels there was a dynamic minority of leftists and anarchists, who on the first day (November the 14th) took the initiative in sitting in at Polytechnio; yet they failed to impose their convictions on other students. To be more specific, the leftists wanted the uprising to be not only a struggle against the dictatorship but also against the capitalist system itself. Eventually, it was the opinion of the majority which prevailed, namely the fight for the restoration of democracy. So, after the political changeover the leftists and anarchists continued their struggle against the state and the capital considering that the visions of polytechnic uprising were still unfulfilled. Within this context the uprising became a memorable historical event for anarchists and an inspiring emblem for their struggle.

Accordingly the commemoration days and especially the last day's march gives the anarchist the opportunity on one hand to denounce the political parties and the regime as enemies of the working class and its interests; on the other hand, to provoke the police forces to clash with them. And of course in order to make it happen the anarchists throw stones and Molotov bombs at the police forces that hit them back and run after them with a view to dispersing them. Almost always the anarchists removed in the streets of Exharhia and quite often while they act so they destroy banking establishments, stores and government buildings.

¹² To be more specific, in 1952 the American ambassador to Athens John Peurifoy made a public statement in which he recommended that the Greek government should change the electoral system otherwise United States would cut down the economic aid to Greece.

¹³ A cause of anti-Americanism was also the U.S.A position on the Cyprus question and the anchoring of the 6th American fleet outside Piraeus' port since 1972 as a counterbalance to the intense soviet maritime presence in Eastern Mediterranean Sea.

¹⁴ In 1980 two demonstrators (Yakovos koumis, Stamatina Kanelopoulou) were killed. In 1985 a fifteen years old schoolboy (Michalis Kaltezas) was also killed and the Chemical Laboratories of Athens University were burnt down.

Exharhia was the living space of the uprising, so after 1974 the whole area and not only the university building became a symbol of contestation. In nineteenth century Exharhia was the quarter of (construction) workers and students¹⁵ and of the lower and middle bourgeoisie. In the middle-war period it became the neighborhood of upper bourgeois as well. People of Arts, of Politics and Scholars had their residence in Exharhia. After 1974 Exharhia continued to have a rich social, political and artistic life. That was mainly attributed to the fact that here one can find various establishments dealing with that kind of life. For instance, there are a lot of publishing houses, printing houses, bookshops, theaters, ateliers, galleries, open-air cinemas, stages of rock and punk music for young people, bars, artistic and political café, taverns and haunts of groups with extreme-left political views. In other words after metapolitefsis Exharhia became an “alternative-free urban space” of inhabitants and regular visitors who came from every walk of life and they held different political views but their common ground was the anti-conformism and the contestation as a way of life. This identity of Exharhia was certainly due to the symbolism that the whole area had gain because of the polytechnic uprising.

In a metaphorical sense the leftists and the anarchists never “quitted” Polytechnio; the symbolism of Exharhia attracted the young people who believed in social revolution and they patterned themselves upon the rebels of polytechnic uprising. Therefore, in time Exharhia changed into a haunt of leftists and anarchists, which was inaccessible to groups with differed political ideas, even to the police for several years. This development certainly relates to the decision of the state to let anarchists change the quarter into their haunt for two causes; firstly because straight after metapolitefsis most of the people and especially young people demanded for freedom of thought, speech and expression which were forbade by the anticommunism that had prevailed in Greece since the Civil War; secondly because the creation of an anarchic neighborhood enabled the state to control the extremists. Two forms of state control emerged during the years: a) the “Virtue” police operations which concerned police raids on both public and private spaces, bringing to police station for identification and arrests and b) the free heroin traffic, which prevented the expansion of political radicalism and anarchism among the young people.

Of course the forbearance that the police show towards extremists, when at the last day’s march let anarchists destroy private and public property without arresting them, has been denounced many times by the public opinion; since these incidents distract people’s mind from the real aims of the commemoration, that is to remind the meaning and the moral of the uprising especially to the young people who haven’t got the experience of a dictatorial regime.

3.2. Revolutionary Organization 17 November (Epanastatiki Organossi dekaefta Noemvri)

The causes of terrorism are connected to the political conditions prevailing the first days of metapolitefsis and especially to the fact that the junta didn’t fall after a popular uprising but because of the coup against the President of Cyprus Makarios, which occasioned the Turkish invasion in the island and forced dictator Ioannides to turn the government over to Karamanlis with the intention of preventing a war between Greece and Turkey. Therefore, the situation required the prompt transition to democracy in order to avoid a new dictatorship by the military who disagreed with Ioannides.¹⁶

Under these circumstances the dictators but also the tormentors and those who were responsible for the “massacre” at Polytechnio were brought to trial in 1975; yet these trials and the resulting convictions satisfied the public opinion only partly; firstly because not all of those who were responsible brought to trial; and secondly because many people thought that the sentences didn’t fit the hideous crimes they had committed.¹⁷

¹⁵ In 19th century at the surrounding area of Exharhia were built the National Technical University of Athens (Polytechnio), the Athens University and its Chemical Laboratories and the Archeological Museum of Athens.

¹⁶ During the first six months after the return of Karamanlis to Greece at least four attempts of coup were made. So, Karamanlis was sleeping in a yacht for three weeks for fear of taking place an attempt on his life. Furthermore in 24th of February 1975 the government of Karamanlis announced that a military conspiracy had been brought to light and it was already eliminated.

¹⁷ For instance, the ringleaders of the dictatorship were sentenced to death but Karamanlis’ government commuted their punishment to life imprisonment and as it was expected to happen their victims were exasperated by Prime Minister’s leniency.

The disappointment was bigger for those people who hadn't forgotten that the collaborationists with Germans during the last war not only weren't punished but also they helped the state to win the civil war and afterwards they became fanatical pursuers of communists. In other words, once more the same old history was repeated. The impunity of junta's collaborators caused the general discontent among the people and offered the terrorists the excuse they needed to question the new regime's intentions and to call upon the people to continue the struggle until the fall of capitalism and imperialism. For that reason, the revolutionary-terrorist group, "17 November (17N)", chose a name which referred to the last day of the polytechnic uprising; a name which declared that its members considered themselves the ones who carried on the struggle of the "polytechnic generation" against the capitalistic system.

Although in the beginning 17N's attacks had a clear anti-American and antifascist character¹⁸ afterwards the organization was opposed to the Hellenic Republic and especially to its foreign policy but also to the Greek bourgeoisie and its supporters.¹⁹ In their proclamations the terrorists claimed that their cardinal motives were to drive the U.S. bases out of Greece, to remove the Turkish military from Cyprus and to sever Greece's connections with the NATO and the European Union.

17N's terrorism was a stigma on the political life of contemporary Greece for a long period, from 1975 till 2002; on one hand, the transition to democracy proved to be a not so easy process; on the other hand the terrorism related to the antifascist organizations which fought junta and especially to the socialist party (PASOK). American officials along with leading Greek politicians and journalists of the right-wing party claimed that the members of 17N and of PASOK came from the same antifascist organizations. Even more, there were Greek politicians who mentioned the name of Andreas Papandreou as mastermind of 17N and named two officers of The National Intelligence Service (EYP),²⁰ -supporters of Papandreou and PASOK- as the supposed controllers of the organization. Yet, these accusations proved unfounded after the arrest in 2002 and the trial (in 2003 and 2007) of the terrorists. The only fact which related the 17N to the socialist party was that the chief of operations, Dimitris Koufontinas, was member of PASOK's high school organization and admirer of Andreas Papandreou in his late teens.

4. The Greek Parliament and the official celebration of the uprising

In 1999, in the summer Parliament division, the deputies and the representatives of all parties had a long discussion on a bill which sanctioned the 17th of November as a day of pay homage to the Greek Youth and as a commemoration day of the Greek people's Resistance against the dictatorship and in support of Democracy. So, after a 26-year-delay and three rejected bills (in 1990, 1997 and 1998) the political parties finally decided to establish the official commemoration of the polytechnic uprising by majority and not unanimous. The Greek Communist Party (KKE) didn't vote for the bill, because its proposal of the 17th of November to be sanctioned also as a day of vigilance and fight for democracy and national independence was turned down. The acceptance of this proposal would imply that the visions of the uprising were unfulfilled and the struggle would fairly carry on. The Greek people's Resistance against dictatorship took such a long time to be recognized by the Parliament because the polytechnic uprising became an undisputed symbol for The Greek Left altogether (the centrists, lefts and leftists) and therefore from the very beginning it was related to Anti-Americanism, armed resistance,²¹ social overthrow and even terrorism. In other words the polytechnic uprising was related to an ideology and its strategy which was completely rejected by The Right and its extremists. For that reason, the party of New Democracy denied the official celebration of the uprising during the first years after metapolitefsis.

¹⁸ The first terrorist attack, in December 1975, was against the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency's station chief in Athens, Richard Welch. The subsequent attacks were against the former intelligence chief of the Greek security police (Evangelos Mallios) in 1976 and the deputy commander of the riot police (MAT) (Pantelis Petrou) and his driver (Sotiris Stamoulis) in 1980. Both victims, Mallios and Petrou, had tortured people during the junta's period

¹⁹ For instance in the long list of 17N's attacks appear names such as the Turkish embassy counselor Ömer Haluk Sipahioğlu, the public prosecutor Constantinos Androuridakis, the center-right Greek publisher Nikos Momferatos, the member of Greek Parliament Pavlos Bacoyannis, the Greek industrialist Alexander Athanassiades-Bodossakis and the ship-owner Constantinos Peratikos.

²⁰ These officers were Costas Tsimas-head of EYP and colonel Yannis Alexakis-security director of EYP.

²¹ The Resistance Organizations against dictatorship were identified with armed resistance because some of them took recourse to bombing acts, even if these acts weren't so many and mainly not very successful as operations.

And when the socialist party came into power didn't sanction immediately its official celebration.²² PASOK's priority was the recognition of the National Resistance against German occupation which was pending for a longer period of time mostly for similar causes. So, the recognition of the National Resistance in 1982 17th of August paved the way to the official commemoration of the polytechnic uprising seventeen years later.

Furthermore, when eventually in 1999 26th August the polytechnic uprising was established as an official celebration, the social and political conditions had completely been changed; the left ideology (socialist and communist) was a spent force for the majority of Youth. Consequently the commemoration of this event had lost the throbbing of the first years and the 17th of November simply became a national holiday which didn't threaten the economic and social status quo any more. That's why some deputies suggested that the official celebration should be accompanied by festivities which will help with the revival of the commemoration so as to bring the meaning and the moral of the event to light.

Epilogue

Nowadays, Greece is sorely tried by a fiscal crisis which is turned into a major political crisis. Under these circumstances all the political parties talk about the need of a new metapolitefsis (political changeover). So, everybody seeks for a new symbol and a new corner stone since the visions of polytechnic uprising for freedom, democracy, national independence, progress and social justice proved to be a chimera...

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²² In 1983 9th of November PASOK's Minister of National Education issued a circular, which established the 17th of November as commemoration day of the polytechnic uprising for the primary and secondary schools.