

# Civil Society, Identity, Space and Power in the Neoliberal Age in Latin America and Greece

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**Résumé :** Aujourd'hui plus que jamais, avec les sociétés postindustrielles en pleine crise économique, il est impératif d'examiner les formes de réaction contre la philosophie et la pratique du néolibéralisme, surtout dans les pays ayant des graves problèmes d'inégalité et une longue histoire de forte dépendance politique et économique aux nations développées de l'Occident. Superposée à cette particularité historique et sociale, qui caractérise l'Amérique latine et l'Europe du Sud-est (le présent travail se réfère uniquement à la Grèce), vient, à cet âge hypermoderne actuel, la question de la fluidité de l'espace, de l'identité et de l'emploi, de l'homogénéisation culturelle et de la réalité virtuelle qui sont favorisées par la primauté du néolibéralisme, soutenue par les nouvelles technologies et la révolution électronique. Ces nouvelles circonstances se développent différemment dans les environnements géographiques, sociaux et culturels variés de la planète, ayant pour résultat une différenciation significative dans les formes d'adaptation ou de résistance/réaction à la pénétration de la mondialisation comme modèle économique. Notre intention est de tracer les formes contemporaines de résistance au modèle néolibéral qui prévaut dans les pays d'Amérique latine et la Grèce (une comparaison favorisée par les caractéristiques communes dans, principalement, leur histoire politique de la décolonisation au présent) et leur relation avec les mouvements précédents (1960-1970). Ces formes de réaction seront examinées par rapport aux questions de « territorialité » et d' « identité » qui sont contestées et/ou réfutées par la mise en pratique du modèle économique dominant et par les théories post-constructivistes du sujet - ces dernières, bien sûr, observées sous un angle différent, qui va à l'encontre des valeurs du néolibéralisme -.

**Mots-clés :** identité, espace, Amérique latine, Europe du Sud-est

**Abstract:** Today more than ever, with post-industrial societies in economic crisis, it is imperative to examine the forms of reaction against the philosophy and practice of neoliberalism, especially in countries with aggravated problems of inequality and a long history of strong political and economic dependence on the developed nations of the West. Superimposed on this historical and social particularity, which characterises Latin America and Southeast Europe (this paper will refer solely to Greece), comes, in this present hypermodern age, the issue of fluidity of space, identity and employment, cultural homogenisation and the virtual reality that promotes the precedence of neoliberalism supported by new technologies and the electronic revolution. These new circumstances develop differently in the planet's varied geographical, social and cultural environments, resulting in a significant differentiation in the forms of adaptation or resistance/reaction to the penetration of globalisation as an economic model. Our intention is to trace contemporary forms of resistance

to the prevailing neoliberal model in Latin American countries and Greece (a comparison favoured by common features in, primarily, their political history from decolonisation to the present) and their relation to earlier movements (1960-1970). These forms of reaction will be examined in relation to issues of "territoriality" and "identity" that are challenged and/or confuted by the practical implementation of the prevailing economic model and by post-constructionist theories of the subject - these last of course, observed from a different perspective, which runs counter to the values of neoliberalism.

**Key words:** identity, space, Latin America, Greece

## Introduction

The comparison between Latin American countries and Greece has been attempted in earlier studies by Greek researchers, examining political and economic phenomena in these geographical areas from the colonial era to their periods of dictatorship. Specifically, in a book published in the United Kingdom in 1986, Nicos Mouzelis sustains the possibility of such a comparison with arguments drawn from history, forms of political governance and economic development of those regions<sup>1</sup>. Latin American societies, like those in the Balkans, existed until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century as subject segments of vast despotic empires, Iberian and Ottoman respectively and thus did not experiment with the less autocratic absolutism of western European societies. On achieving independence they immediately established western parliamentary forms of political governance, which have displayed remarkable endurance in spite of all their problematical aspects. In Greece and the Latin American countries, this lasted from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the imposition of dictatorships and military rule. The economic situations of these countries were also similar, with substantial economic infrastructures shaped by late industrialisation during the inter-war and post-war periods, and characterised by exploitative relations with the capitalist centre (Mouzelis uses the terms "late-late industrialising capitalist societies" and "countries of the parliamentary semi-periphery"<sup>2</sup>). As Mouzelis states in his introduction, his comparative approach aims at contributing to the interpretation of certain critical political transitions and behaviours that occurred at approximately the same time in these countries, particularly in the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He distinguishes three types of transition from oligarchic parliamentarianism (from colonialism to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century) to more extensive forms of political participation (first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until the imposition of dictatorships). These types of transition are: urban populism (in Latin America), rural populism (in the northern Balkans), and the expansion of political participation through the extension and transformation of existing patronage networks (in the case of Greece). While in Western Europe this transition occurred in the wake of capitalist industrialisation (which also explains the function of systems that are based on organised political parties with broad popular support and participation), in the case of the countries of Latin America and the Balkans it took place in pre-industrialised societies. This means that this political transition was not based on the active participation of the industrial classes, mainly of the mass, autonomous working class

organisations, as was the case in many western European countries. The result was the dependant political integration of the rising middle classes and the conservation of the basic characteristics of the parliamentary politics of the preceding oligarchic period. Populism and patronage relations<sup>3</sup> are two forms of breach in the political systems of Latin American countries and Greece that still survive today, although in different guises. This phenomenon created a “negative legacy” for the resolution of democratic problems in later periods.

If we accept that the development, political and economical, of the countries we are examining is not linear, but traces a course dependant on a dynamic economic - political - cultural sphere shaped historically within the broader capitalist system, then we will understand the qualitative differences between the paths taken by those that follow the “western model of development”. Our brief reference to the historical circumstances that shaped the economic-political situations of the countries we are examining manages to outline, albeit with a considerable, perhaps over-simplistic, degree of abstraction, the conditions in which these societies operate, facilitating our attempt to comprehend the way certain formations and behaviors work today at the level of civil society, as well as the limits of their political role in matters of democratization and equality (this is Gramsci’s concept, who described the political life of a society using two terms, the political society and the civil society, thus differentiating the level of governance - state, legislative status - from that of organizations described as private<sup>4</sup>). This issue (of organizing citizens with the aim of making them intervene in the political management of their country’s problems) involves issues of identity, space and power that take on a particular intensity in the case of the Latin American countries.

### **The social movements of the postmodernist period. Approaches and problems**

Latin America has produced a plethora of social movements, which from time to time assume a particularly significant role in the political life of society. One such time was the period of the 60s and 70s, when, from the most organized to the most spontaneous movements, new ways of collective expression and political intervention were attempted. Such movements created a “street culture”, which integrated the arts into the urban space and incorporated them into its architecture, representing elements of daily struggle and exploitation, injustice and inequality, hope and ambition for a better future. References to indigenous and local elements, to myths and historical events, indicate a resolve for social change and a different perception of political and social involvement. Art is an inseparable part of the living space of human beings; it refuses to become integrated into the world of commercial exchange, profit and exploitation. The “muralismo” movement, for example, is among other things a singular form of criticism of the role and place of the artist in western society. In those same decades, the “cultural revolution” in Europe, and in many of the countries of the capitalist centre, expresses the disposition of mainly young individuals and groups to intervene in the socio-political process, to seek a new identity and new social values. The circumstances of the post-war period, the Cold War, the capitalist organization of production and the resulting exploitation and marginalization of social and cultural groups led to the social

explosion of May 1968. Here too, art as a powerfully symbolic sphere takes on a leading role in the youthful uprisings. It states opposition to the capitalist value system and redefines the relation between artist and society.

On social, political and philosophical levels, the binary oppositions of the hegemonic discourse of western societies are contested. Activists express their resistance by creating a counter-culture or underground, while philosophers pronounce the end of anthropocentric culture, of reason, of the subject, even of the History of grand narratives. Derrida's deconstruction of language is in fact the deconstruction of western culture and of the values and models on which it was built. It was the most despairing and "radical" criticism of capitalism attempted by intellectuals in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The social movements of the 60s and 70s caused ruptures, raised doubts and brought about conceptual and aesthetic innovations. They produced not only political thought and action, but also culture. They awoke a new awareness of daily life, social relationships, space and city. The exclusion of difference became the acceptance of difference within a broader whole that is not a "Whole", i.e. a system whose centre imposes the "harmonious" function of all its parts, which are arranged within the logical framework of dominant and dominated.

Even the architects of this period object to purity in architectural style and declare themselves in favour of the inclusion of contrasts and differences that create an aesthetic of multisignificance. This multisignificance tolerates subjective perceptions and interpretations and responds to the multiple social and cultural identities that make up a society. The demand for non-hierarchised space, for spatial structures without a centre, for an architecture that the user himself can create according to his own needs, shakes the very foundations of architectural language.

These social movements did not succeed in bringing about subversions, or create any radical changes that would significantly affect capitalism's political orientation and choices. Their role was restricted to adding to the code of "human rights", to highlighting some of the existing social differences, and to limiting the instances of "exclusion" of social groups with a marginal role. Not only did the capitalist system not succumb to this social criticism, but it assimilated much of it by incorporating the new conceptual and aesthetic approaches of these movements into its profit-making mechanisms. The international industrial and entertainment markets turned the social and intellectual experimentations of this period to their advantage. In countries of the periphery and semi-periphery, they did not hesitate to install dictatorships to control the markets and wealth-producing resources. Latin America and Greece experienced such dictatorships, while in other parts of the planet the war for the imposition and enforcement of "democracy" continued to constitute a means of supporting, preserving and expanding capitalism.

The welfare state has become progressively debilitated and has left the social security of its citizens to the free market. Neoliberal ideology in the context of the electronic revolution, of the new technologies and scientific innovations,

acquires realistic political prospects for the movement of capital and the political and cultural regeneration of the capitalist system. The last two decades have been referred to as the period of globalization, hyper modernism or post capitalism. Flexibility of labor in the workplace and of relationships, mobility, spectacle and consumption are the new “values” of western civilization. The object is deified, its use-value denied. It is transformed into an object of “desire”, a consumer good that holds its place in the market by obeying all the rules of commerce (and these rules are shaped through research into the individuals’ buyer behaviour as described in the psychograms of its analysts). Even urban space and its architecture is transformed into spectacle for consumption, into surface for projecting the messages of the advertising industry and other politically harmless symbols, far removed from the threats posed by a critical representational tool. Public space also begins a gradual retreat before the demands of privatization, and is transformed into collective space providing “safety” and multifunctionality around an inevitable core of commercial activity. The logic of the market is all-pervasive, eroding the public domain and eating away at knowledge itself with the recent compact between capital and the university.

### **The social movements of hypermodernity. Approaches and questions**

New social movements are arising in response to the new living conditions imposed by neoliberalism. In his studies on the social movements of Latin America, Raul Zibechi notes that one such common feature is “territorialisation”, that is, permanent installation in physical spaces repossessed or acquired after long struggle, patent or underground<sup>5</sup>. This territorial demand is the response of these social strata to the “deterritorialisation” in the productive sphere, in the factories and on the farms, that has been the result of the implementation of neoliberal policy. Their intention is to create self-managing units and to reconstruct “ethnic” territories, usually on the outskirts of cities or in areas of intensive farming. This act of territorialisation, in the city as well as in the countryside, is a step towards the city, towards the inhabited space, becoming something fundamentally different. The “right to the city” is, according to David Harvey, the right of all to participate in the production processes of urban space having as criterion the satisfaction of our needs. This right is connected with the struggle against the capital that in the western world manages inhabited space for its own benefit<sup>6</sup>.

With the implementation of liberal economic policy after 1970 and with investments in the market of fixed capital, in the stock market and in private property particularly in the last two decades, the phenomenon of the loss of jobs (absence of investment in production), of the increase in the value of capital assets and of the concomitant rise in the value of areas of urban space, has become obvious. The marginalization of segments of the population due to these financial choices of reproduction of capital creates redistributions not only in the use of urban space but also in the type of exclusion/inclusion of the social groups that make up the urban population. Moreover, conflicting phenomena such as the economic deprivation of large parts of the urban population combined with the need for their participation in the land market/movement of capital invested in land lead to a policy of lending to lower

socio-professional strata, the result being almost certain financial catastrophe (inability to meet the terms of the loan) and even greater marginalization. Large parts of the population are denied the “right” to the city, underlined David Harvey in his speech at the World Social Forum held in Belem, Brazil, in 2009<sup>7</sup>. The seizure of mortgaged properties and loss of assets by low-wage social strata is now widespread and fires the social movements to demand jobs, housing, a change of social systems, the overthrow of the power structures, of the cultural models and values of post-capitalism. The struggle for the right to the city thus acquires a crucial significance.

We mentioned territorialisation as the first common feature of the new social movements of Latin America; the second common feature, again according to Raul Zibechi, is the autonomy of these movements “as much in relation to states as to political parties”. It is an autonomy that is both material and symbolic. The members of these movements (the landless peasants, etc.) are working towards securing their material autonomy and becoming independent of “employers” and state policies, covering their basic needs of survival. These two goals, of territoriality and material autonomy, are the terms that underpin the identity of those social groups that are resisting the policies and values of neoliberalism through the logic of self-management, of reinforcement of the bonds between members of communities, of emotional release, of a course parallel to but independent of the political parties and the trade unions.

In Europe, the New Social Movements (NSMs), shaped by the repercussions of the student uprising of May 1968, were formed in terms of defending difference, the environment, peace and human rights. These movements evolved and developed in conditions very different to those prevailing in Latin America, due to the particularities of the social structure of European countries and their position and role in the global economy. What they do share, however, is an “anti-hegemonist” attitude, an opposition to the dominant neoliberal model of economic and political organization. New social alliances arose and rallied around the new social movements. The discourse of the NSMs in Europe did not confine itself to criticizing the individual institutions and arrangements of the post-industrial model of social organization, but challenged the ideological basis and values of the model itself, denouncing the hierarchical and power structures, exploitation and inequality, consumerism and militarism, and environmental destruction wreaked in the name of profit. In Greece, these movements are viewed with uncertainty because of the powerful role played by the political parties and unionists in their confrontational and assertive political action.

The NSMs in Europe and in the Occident generally, for the most part continue to express the reservations, the objections and the protests that were articulated by the 1960s generation against industrial culture and capitalist rationale. In contemporary social movements, these protests, social criticism and revolutionary intent are expressed more systematically than before. Shaped and coordinated on a global scale, they embody the ideology of the “Lacanian left” that introduces the psychoanalytical factor into the political field, arguing that the psychoanalytic bond is fundamentally a social bond and does not refer exclusively to the sphere of individuality. The distinction between individual

and social is deconstructed, as are all the binary oppositions that compose the meanings of language and thus structure hierarchies and voluntary enslavement. Students of Lacan underline that “concepts such as symbolic, real, imaginary, are neither individual nor social. They are both, or perhaps they are beyond both”. Along with the opposition “individual-social”, the oppositions “concept-body” and “rationality-sentiment” are also deconstructed. The historical events that marked the 20<sup>th</sup> century were understood as a failure of the rational subject to overcome false consciousness and to recognize his manifest human rights and class interests. The divergence of theory from practice, of revolutionary premise from social practice, was regarded as proof of the weakness of rationalism against “subjectified ideological fixations” which refer to the debate about identity and the role of the Other in its formation. According to Lacan, the great Other is the environment through which the individual is socialized. The identity of the subject is therefore social and political. Today’s multiplication of social environments in conditions of constant mobility and of multiculturalism creates individuals with multiple identities. The proposal of some intellectuals to abandon the term “identity” in favour of “identification” is a reasonable response to our acceptance of the contemporary person as a fragmented subject. Contemporary social movements respond to this particularity of today’s fragmented subject, who recognizes “himself” in more than one social group with political action. Class integration is no longer the only, or no longer holds a central position in the world of “difference”. The concept of “difference” itself rises above social class, and the multiplication of difference is held to be the solution to the social problem of exploitation, violation of rights, voluntary enslavement, repression, violence, social irrationality.

## Epilogue

To what extent do the new social movements threaten the dominance of capitalism in its globalised version? How much do they remain in the field of confrontational political action, participating at the same time in what the “Lacanian left” call the “deconstruction of the anthropocentric western culture”?

Neoliberalism has already managed to assimilate “difference”, to incorporate it into its political platforms. Respect for difference, pluralism and polyphony are acquiring formal meaning in the discourse on good governance. The political correctness inseparable from the mass democracy of post-industrial civilization tends to transform “civil society” from a social arena of conflict and resistance into an institution that deals peacefully with political society. Ideological elements of the new social movements are transformed into elements of the hegemonic discourse of neoliberal systems. Revolution or assent? Why is respect for difference incorporated in the dominant political discourse, and movements like feminism, homosexuality movement etc. deemed worthy causes, while class difference is interpreted as a threat and leads to the adoption of tactics that exclude and marginalize economically weaker social groups rather than tactics that would solve their material problems and needs? Why does economic deprivation create chiefly a fear of criminality, from which “healthy” society tries to protect itself by raising actual and metaphorical walls within the city, in gated communities that reverse the terms of social exclusion/inclusion? The

inclusion of the middle and higher social strata in private cities is a thoroughly negative reaction of these strata against the public and the social, against the very concept of society. Their role is becoming parasitical, and this fact is inscribed in the very space that follows social change.

The spaces of production repossessed by social movements, the spontaneous socio-geographical formations, will develop into utopian islands if they do not function within the “political” framework of the wider society in which they exist. Entrenched “politically and territorially” in a period when networks and flows organize the economy and culture in global scale, they will expose their “new” identity to the erosion of the environment, incapable of protecting it from the Other that constantly will besiege it. The contestation of traditionally leftist political parties could generate new forms of political organization, but could also result in utopian social formations, which operate as a “revolutionary event”, a “revolutionary moment” without duration and extent, selfishly enclosed within itself. A re-examination of the “autonomy” of the new social movements and the role of the proliferation of “difference” in relation to the Revolutionary Act that endures and spreads socially and geographically would be wise.

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## Notes

\* This paper was delivered at the conference *New Thinking on Citizenship, Power, and Public Space in Latin America*. Roskilde University (RUC). Denmark. June 3-4, 2009.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Nicos Mouzelis. *Politics in the Semi-Periphery. Early Parliamentarism and Late Industrialisation in the Balkans and Latin America*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. etc. 1986.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 184, 219.

<sup>3</sup> Mass populist movements are associated with organisational structures amounting to a plebiscite, which a charismatic leader can easily exploit, overriding legal institutions. In populist parties, officials draw power straight from the top, from the charismatic leader, while in a patronage system influential local people and local party leaders largely maintain their autonomy against the national party leadership (an autonomy rooted in their power to direct the votes of their political clients). In Latin America, populism mushroomed in the “golden age” between 1930 and 1960, and was linked with charismatic leaders like Juan Peron of Argentina, Getulio Vargas of Brazil, Lazaro Cardenas of Mexico, Jorge Eliecer Gaitan of Colombia, Victor Raul Haya de la Torre of Peru and Jose Maria Velasco Ibarra of Ecuador (cf. *Populism in Latin America*, Michael Conniff ed., University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa-London 1999, *passim*).



<sup>4</sup> Cf. Richard Paul Bellamy - Darrow Schecter, *Gramsci and the Italian State*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1993, p. 38.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Raul Zibechi, *Dispersing Power. Social Movements as Anti-State Forces*, AK Press, Oakland etc. 2010, *passim*.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Don Mitchell, *The Right to the City. Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space*, Guilford Press, New York 2003, *passim*.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. <http://www.reclaiming-spaces.org/crisis/archives/245>.