



The Everyday and the Evental Public Space: Rethinking the Spatiotemporal Modalities of Radical Political Events

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Abstract: In this paper, we put forward an examination of the interconnections between public space, the everyday, and the event in order to rethink the spatiotemporal modalities of political action. Recent mass mobilisations and civil unrest events around the globe have brought to the fore the complex relationship between political practices and public space. These indicate a critique of representative democracy, authoritarian governance, and precarious living conditions, as well as entailing new ways of doing and conceptualising politics. Our paper approaches the production and (re)-configuration of public space through a spatiotemporal analysis of collective action based on the events that took place in Athens, in December 2008, and in Tottenham, London, in August 2011. By considering the everyday socio-political dynamics of public space as formative of radical political practices, we also pay attention to its evental (re) production. Such a process, we argue, entails the potentiality for rupture, contestation and radical imagination.

Keywords: public space, event, everyday life, revolt, collective action, political mobilisation

Introduction

Everyday life is confrontational.
(Slogan on wall in central Athens, December 2008)

When in October 2005 several insurrectional events erupted in the Parisian banlieues, as well as in other French cities, not many people would have considered that these would foretell the emergence of a wider urban dynamic associated with an altogether different way of doing politics and engaging with the city. A few years later, in December 2008, the Greek revolt erupted with all its force. This was followed in 2010 by the Arab Spring and in 2011 by the UK riots and the Occupy Movement. The 2013 Gezi uprising in Turkey, and, later, the 2015

student protests across South African university campuses, have once again brought to the fore the production of novel political forms in public space, as well as its radical reimagination.

Of particular interest is how these multiple political contestations, each emerging within specific socio-political and historical landscapes, reflect aspects of two key broad dynamics: first, a critique of representative democracy and a rising rage against authoritarianism, neo-liberalism, and precarious living conditions; and second, a turn towards another way of doing and conceptualising politics rooted in the experience of the everyday which engenders emancipatory potentials. Of critical importance here is also the fact that these processes have been enacted via the production of unmediated interactions with public space and the city. This indicates the critical role of public space in the development of these recent political events (Hammond 2013; Lubin 2012; Rabat 2012), and offers a radical framework for the reinterpretation of what today constitutes *the political*. Such an approach also illustrates that public spaces, as social products (Lefebvre 1991a), are not fixed but rather processual, relational, highly contested and dynamic, which embody the complexity of everyday social relations. As such, the production of these contested public spaces points towards critical interconnections between memory, everyday experience, and the emergence of radical potentialities.

In this paper, we argue that the embodied experiences of the everyday, and the socio-spatial dynamics which shape them, are formative of political practices during events of civil unrest. Furthermore, by examining the production of public space during these events, we also aim to unveil its emancipatory potentials. As Bassett (2008:907) has shown, space and spatial relations play an important role in the formulation of the event through the enactment of spatiotemporal ruptures. Shaw's (2012:616) conceptualisation of events as "already localized within objects themselves" is also helpful since it provides a theoretical platform for understanding (public) space as embodying the potential for evental change. Drawing upon Badiou's idea of *inexistence*, Shaw (2012:620) considers objects to "carry with them inexistent elements that are potential sources of change". Springer (2011:528) also recognises public space to have an "inherently contested character" which "reveals that it is never free from the risk of disorder". What defines, then, the evental qualities of public space is its potential for rupture and contestation within the context of the everyday.

By taking into consideration Dikeç's (2005:185) understanding of politics as an "ongoing confrontation", we turn our attention to "the role of space in the unfolding of an actual event" (Bassett 2008:908) as a way to rethink established views about what counts as political, and who ascribes political value and meaning to collective action in public space. As we aim to show, paying attention to the use of public space during events can offer important insights into the way in which these are permeated and configured by the dynamics of everyday life. Hence, our exploration of the spatiotemporal registers of radical politics approaches the event-everyday relation as an ongoing contingent and co-constitutive process. Utilising Lefebvre's work, Halvorsen (2015:408) also identifies this dialectical relationship when he considers the act of "taking space" to be "both a

moment of rupture and part of everyday life". This is because, "[e]veryday life and moments exist in an internal relationship, in which both are productive of each other, criticising each other in a perpetual movement" (Halvorsen 2015:406). Seen from this point of view, the events in Tottenham and in Athens, which developed within their own unique contextual dynamics, can be considered to entail certain similar political and spatiotemporal qualities.

The paper's analytical tools have been informed by different methodological frameworks. In the case of Greece, the intervention has been shaped by PhD fieldwork in Athens on radical political practices during 2008–2009. Research on the Tottenham case study, on the other hand, was based firstly on a longer project on the African diaspora conducted between 2006 and 2010, and secondly, was stimulated by the experience of *literally* being "at home" when the events broke out. In an instant, the everyday acquired the characteristics of the evental. As our argument also highlights, though, the event was interpreted as such through the everyday experience of living in the area. Thus it was through the everyday that the incidental could be explained and manifested as evental. As a result, we argue, spontaneity¹ in these actions, and thus, the modalities that shape an event, can be rendered more intelligible when contextualised in relation to local and everyday spatiotemporal processes.

The reason for which we have decided to focus on these two events, apart from our research and experiences, has to do with our intention to rethink the role of public space in the formation of these events. By attending to the dynamic politicisation of the use of public space and its materiality in seemingly very different contexts, we develop an analytical framework for understanding the ways in which this process co-shapes the production of collective action and subjectivities. We suggest, first, that the series of radical activities that took place in Athens and Tottenham, were co-shaped by everyday experiences of public space, and second, that they entail eventful potentialities which manifest a rupture with the existing social and spatial constellations and power relations, thus reflecting a different way of articulating and performing the political.

The Everyday Spatiotemporal Configuration of Events

There were moments during the 2008 revolt in Athens, when participants were engaged in activities which, if viewed from outside this spatiotemporal context, could seem mundane. And yet, cooking, eating, and cleaning collectively or even dancing and playing soccer in the streets of the metropolitan centre became acts of subversions of the everyday. Common, ordinary activities, had become signs of uncommonness.

In these moments, we argue, "the shock of the new" (Highmore 2002a:2) interweaves with elements of the familiar and the intimate. What makes these practices, which in other respects can be seen as ordinary, important analytically is the fact that they encompass both elements of familiarity and unfamiliarity. While these practices possessed some elements of familiarity they also acquired an essence of unfamiliarity precisely because of the time, place and context in which they took place. It is the deep entanglement of these two features and the

dialectic relationship which permeates them which is of interest to us. What then constitutes an event in this context? To what extent does the constitution of that which is not expected—the event—entail features of banality and familiarity that are essential for its formation? Also, what can the spatiotemporal modalities of the event tell us about its radical potential for change? Here, we use these questions to guide our exploration of radical political events.

Revolts and mass mobilisations disrupt the normality of the city transforming its daily flows. Even more, they challenge its dominant “symbolic economy”, that which Zukin (1995:3) conceptualises as the intertwining of the cultural and symbolic representations and meanings ascribed to the city’s materialities with “entrepreneurial capital”. Public mass protests and demonstrations also play an important role in (re)shaping the boundaries of the relationship between citizens, the city, and the state, thus bringing to the fore important ways in which participants (re)imagine and (re)position themselves in relation to the city’s public space. The streets, for example, become the site where different collective modes of action, narrative and movement can appear and take place; they become performative (public) spaces where “bodies in alliance” can act “in concert on conditions of equality” (Butler 2011). Crucial is the fact that the collectivities that acted within the situation (of the two events that we discuss), engendered political practices which were external to the institutional mechanisms of power, thus pointing to the making of different, more inclusive, and unmediated forms of political action. As a result, what is ultimately questioned are the existing normative forms of socialisation. These events essentially produce public spaces where other kinds of collectivities and socialities can emerge. Here, we analytically conceptualise such emergent radical political practices through the interconnections between the event, public space, and the everyday.

The everyday, we suggest, can be grasped as an assemblage of processual situations. Instead of conceptualising it as the surface upon which situations emerge, we approach it as an *open* spatiotemporal configuration where the concrete meets the elusive (Highmore 2002b:5). As Lefebvre (1991b:13–14) points out, there is a “mythical” dimension within the everyday. In this sense, the difficulty of “register[ing]” the everyday (Highmore 2002b:3)² acquires a temporal quality. As Sayeau (2013) indicates, that which is (considered to be) “elusive” and to “escape(s) our grasp” (Felski 2000:78) can only be defined “when rendered in relation to what is not everyday” (Sayeau 2013:9), when its abstractness is contrasted with lucidity—the moment when the event is proclaimed. In many respects, the “abstractness” (Sayeau 2013:11) of the everyday, as an analytical concept, has defined the various ways in which numerous thinkers have approached it. It is, however, exactly this vagueness which provides it with its critical analytical quality (Gardiner 2000:2). If the “everyday escapes” as Blanchot (1987:14) observes, it is not only due to its abstract and elusive qualities, but also because it offers a way out of the ordinary and of repetition. In fact, the everyday has been conceived of as being constituted by a dual process: whilst on the one level it is the site of repetition, boredom, and alienation, it is also the site of emancipation and creative action (Gardiner 2000; Highmore 2002b; Lefebvre 1991b; Springer 2011:544). Hence, Gardiner (2000:17) suggests that we

approach the everyday dialectically, since “it is simultaneously an alienated and potentially liberated state”.

This tension, between creativity and spontaneity, and routine, repetition and boredom, informs our discussion of the everyday. What lies in between the seemingly organised structure of repetition and triviality is the unexpected, that which exceeds the ordinary—the extraordinary (Sandywell 2004:162). Such a perspective resonates with Lefebvre’s (1991b:13) assertion that “[t]he most extraordinary things are also the most everyday”. In exploring the conjunction between the ordinary and the extraordinary, we look at the ways in which the event itself reflects a process through which the everyday is challenged and reconfigured at the intersection between the known and the unexpected. As Sayeau (2013:13–14) explains, while “[t]he everyday is always there” it acquires a certain critical weight through its dialectic relationship to the event. In similar vein, Caton (1999:8), building on Foucault’s (1991) notion of “eventalization”, claims that the event is “always already there, though under the surface or in the background, and then appears spectacularly for a while”. Our intention in discussing these two events is to show that even though spontaneous, the collectivities which emerge within and through the event are deeply historical and also rooted in the spatiotemporal everyday experiences of the subjects that act within them.

At the same time the interweaving dynamic of these two poles (event-everyday) engenders new potentialities which the event can bring forth. To unveil the generative and creative dynamic of the event, Kapferer (2015:2) suggests that we approach it “as a singularity of forces in which critical dimensions of socio-cultural existence reveal new potentials of the ongoing formation of socio-cultural realities”. By focusing on the uses of (urban) public space during these political events we also aim to examine the extent to which the overlap between the known and the unimaginable (re)shapes existing forms of socialisation as well as our relation to the city. In this context, the event is employed as an analytical tool to discern the critical conjunction between memory, imagination, locality and radical politics, as well as to highlight the eventful potentialities of collective action within the context of public space.

The Spatial Politics of the December 2008 Revolt in Athens

On the Saturday night of 6 December 2008, 15-year-old Alexandros Grigoriopoulos was shot dead by the police in the neighbourhood of Exarcheia in downtown Athens. Soon afterwards, Athens’ city centre became the site of impromptu demonstrations and violent clashes with the police, while commercial stores and banks were also attacked. Three of the most historic universities located in Athens’ city centre were also immediately occupied, becoming spaces of resistance. The following morning collective actions and violent confrontations with the police continued when a massive demonstration attempted to reach the police’s headquarters.

From Monday morning onwards, though, even more people took to the streets, including high school students who walked out of their classes and occupied their schools, second-generation immigrants, and youth in general. They organised and communicated with each other via social media and SMS messages and participated in demonstrations, sit-ins, and clashes with the police, outside parliament but also in other neighbourhoods, thus transforming Athens' public space into an everyday site of mobilisation. "Revenge", and "cops, pigs, murderers", were only some of the slogans shouted repeatedly. That particular Monday became symptomatic of the transition from one political moment to another, from an immediate and spontaneous reaction to the event to the emergence of a massive collective dynamic that reflected a generalised criticism and opposition against the injustice and authoritarianism ingrained in the everyday. A statement published by the Haunt of Albanian Migrants during those days indicates how this collective dynamic created an inclusive space where everyday injustices could be contested:

For us, the organised migrants, this is a second French November of 2005 ... Now is the time for the streets to talk. This scream being heard is for the 18 years of violence, oppression, exploitation, humiliation. These days are ours, too. (Haunt of Albanian Migrants 2008, our translation)

In the days that followed, occupations proliferated and so did protests and demonstrations in various cities across Greece. In Athens, the city centre continued to be the main locus of the demonstrations, as well as the site of intense and violent clashes with the police. However, occupations and protests gradually spread to Athens' peripheral districts. Apart from the growing number of occupied high schools, six days after the revolt erupted, Agios Dimitrios's city hall, a district south of Athens, was occupied. On this occasion, the workers association of the local municipality issued a statement which announced that "we are in a civil war with the fascists, the bankers, the state and the media" (Municipal Workers' Association of Agios Dimitrios 2008). This occupation was the prologue to a series of other occupations of municipal and public buildings across the Athens region. Furthermore, the building of the General Confederation of Greek Workers was also temporarily occupied (17–21 December 2008). In these occupied spaces everyday gatherings and assemblies took place away from any formal institutional framework, thus challenging everyday hierarchical structures. By occupying universities and municipal or local public buildings in order to use them in a manner completely other to their existing function, those who took to the streets were not only challenging and opposing the police, the state, or authoritarian structures, but were also transforming the way in which such public spaces could be used, imagined and organised.

The role of the everyday's spatial and temporal dynamic in the unfolding event can be traced back to the collective uses of public space in Athens' city centre and in the various districts of the wider metropolitan area. Exarcheia, where thousands of people gathered to participate in variegated collective actions during the revolt, constitutes an important example here. Exarcheia is a vibrant neighbourhood in central Athens where several anti-authoritarian, anarchist, and leftist

stekia (hangouts), political spaces, squats, and bookshops are situated. The district is adjacent to the Polytechnic School while it is also in close proximity to other universities. As Vradis (2020:551) explains, the physical and spatial form of Exarcheia, consisting of dense narrow streets and alleys, has co-shaped forms of political struggle in the area. Importantly for our argument, Exarcheia has also been associated with crucial events in Greek modern history. The neighbourhood's materiality embodies memories of political struggles which have defined the socio-political landscape of the country. It was an important site during the armed conflict of December 1944 (the Dekemvriana), between the partisans of the National Liberation Front—Greek People's Liberation Army (EAM-ELAS) on the one side and the state forces and the British army on the other (Charalampidis 2014). The neighbourhood's history is also marked by the 1973 Polytechnic School uprising against the military junta (1967–1974). Since then, the Polytechnic has served as an important space for radical politics, both in the everyday, and also as a gathering site during critical political situations. According to Vradis (2020:550), Exarcheia “radiates a sense of political belonging” forged through the interweaving of historical memory with everyday experience. This everyday (re)production and performativity of memory was a catalyst for the immediate occupation of the Polytechnic after the police murder as well as for the neighbourhood's collective political dynamic. The importance of memory was also reflected in discourses, such as the wall slogan “December '44–December '08, everything continues”,³ which indicated not merely a connection with the past, but its dynamic reproduction in the present. The spatial politics of Exarcheia during the revolt, then, were mainly produced within the context of four co-constitutive factors: first, the fact that it was the site where the young boy was murdered; second, the memory of political struggles which have shaped its spatial and temporal dynamic; third, the occupied Polytechnic School which became the site of everyday gathering and regular confrontation with the police; and fourth, the everyday socio-political and cultural practices that had been taking place in the area.

Overall, the spatial politics of the Athenian metropolitan centre constituted a critical factor during that period. Throughout the revolt, the sites which attracted the majority of the attacks were very specific both in the city centre and the periphery, as well as in other Greek cities—namely, banks, police stations, multinational corporations, state and municipal buildings; in short, the material fabric of political authority and neoliberal capitalism. In the city centre, and even more particularly in the downtown commercial area, the intensity which characterised the dynamic production of collective action was invested with meanings associated with its particular spatial politics. In addition to the targets mentioned above, numerous bus stops, pavements, traffic lights, cars, waste bins, phone booths, billboards, and luxury shops were also targeted.

To make sense of the qualities of this urban rage we have to turn to the everyday spatiotemporal characteristics that define the metropolitan centre. Critical hegemonic and institutional infrastructures, such as the banking nexus and the parliament, as well as major commercial activities, are situated here. It is especially important to note that the pressing urban and infrastructural restructuring

initiated by the 2004 Athens Olympic Games intensified the already alienated, privatised, commodified and highly surveilled character of the city centre, thus producing an even more uneven, unequal, and “polarized” space (Kaika and Karaliotas 2016:560). Hence, meanings of locality were constructed through and via this intense polarisation. In this sense, the city centre is mainly identified with processes of fragmentation, bureaucratic and political authority, and consumerism. Within this context, the pattern of political action that emerged during the revolt in the city centre, and even more specifically, in the areas where institutional, financial, and commercial uses of space predominate, illustrates its identification with a certain territorial, symbolic and geographical order; a very specific “symbolic economy” (Zukin 1995) which engenders these polarisations.

At the same time the public space of the city centre is the site par excellence where authoritarian and unjust government policies have been traditionally opposed through regular mass mobilisations and demonstrations. Therefore, a very dynamic association between the city centre’s public space, political memory, and the performative embodiment of radical politics has been forged. The city centre, then, evinces this twofold quality, as both the space where the struggle had to be fought, and the space which materialises political authority and normality (*kanonikotita*).⁴ This contestation of the “symbolic economy” of commercialisation and normality was demonstrated with remarkable vigour in the image of the immense Christmas tree at Syntagma square that was set ablaze that first Monday evening after the police murder.

Of major significance is also the fact that during the revolt these radical political practices, first, expanded outside the spatial frameworks of Exarcheia and Athens’ city centre, and second, exceeded the temporal characteristics of previous events of socio-political unrest. The several hundred occupied high schools, the streets, as well as the peripheral occupations of public and municipal buildings, became spaces of everyday unmediated collective action. Makrygianni and Tsavdaroglou (2011:49) argue that “[i]n order for the intervention into everydayness to be ‘real’, it had to be as close to everyday life as possible: to the family, the neighbourhood—not a ‘sterile cluster of freedom’ in the centre”. Confrontations with the police also spread widely. Indicative of this is the fact that on many occasions during the revolt, school students organised demonstrations outside several police stations in their local neighbourhoods and attacked them with sticks, stones, and bitter oranges from the trees that lined the streets. Moreover, the main prison facility in Greece, which is located in the west Athenian suburb of Korydallos, was also attacked by local school students. Collective action in the wider peripheral districts of Athens, then, was co-shaped by everyday local meanings of belonging and embodied practices of public space within a neighbourhood (Giovanopoulos 2009).

This simultaneous emergence of collective action throughout the city should be approached as a co-constitutive political dynamic (Giovanopoulos 2009) that “created a labyrinthine network with a start but no finish” (Makrygianni and Tsavdaroglou 2011:50). Vradis (2012) considers this expansion to challenge the “spatial contract”, according to which events of political violence have been concentrated and contained in Exarcheia during the Metapolitefsi (Vradis

2020:543).⁵ By transcending previously established spatiotemporal patterns of action, the revolt's collective dynamic reintroduced everyday life as a critical political aspect. Halvorsen (2015:404) indicates that everyday life mobilises action and shapes activist practices. To say that everyday spatiotemporal dynamics co-shaped the event means to acknowledge that locality and memory were formative of the usage and reproduction of urban public space during the revolt, and thus, constitutive of its politics.

The revolt's immediate dynamic lasted for a bit longer than three weeks, but its effects continue to define the space of the political in Greece. In the following months, the struggle for public space, which was co-formative of the revolt, was rearticulated as a basic form of collective action. For example, when in January 2009 the Athens municipality cut down the trees of a small park in Patissia, a geographically dense and heavily built urban area of the city, in order to turn it into an underground parking lot, local residents took to the streets. This resulted in the occupation of the park and its remaking. A few months later, an open space in Exarcheia, owned by the Technical Chamber of Greece, which was periodically rented as a parking lot, was also occupied and turned into a self-organised public park known as Parko Navarinou. This attempt to (re)use public space in the production of political practices away from institutional politics was also evident in the mass mobilisations that emerged after the eruption of the 2010 crisis in the country. Political events such as the Syntagma square occupation in 2011, as well as the various grassroots practices that developed in response to the imposed austerity, all have strong links to the socio-spatial and political dynamic that emerged during the revolt, exactly because of their grounding in the everyday (Arampatzi 2017:51; Karaliotas 2017). These collective actions, which sprung up within and after the revolt, indicate that such politics do not merely entail aspects of opposition, but rather, they encompass features of another way of imagining and realising *the political*, one which is based on everyday life, which Hage (2012:292) conceptualises as modalities of an "'alter' dimension of politics". Additionally, the examples of self-organisation and the dynamic unmediated collective practices reflected a new kind of interaction with public space, as well as indicated its importance in the making of this new political paradigm. The next section explores this argument further based on the events that took place in Tottenham in August 2011. In order to convey a sense of immediacy, Mattia Fumanti will use a first person account.

Spaces of Everyday Violence in Tottenham

On the night of the riots, on 6 August 2011, I was at home in Tottenham with family and friends when we heard the noise of a helicopter hovering over our heads. We stepped out in the garden and saw what appeared to be a police helicopter with a powerful search light directed towards Tottenham High Road. This was not an unfamiliar sight. If you had lived in Tottenham for any considerable amount of time you would have become accustomed to police helicopters, police cars driving at high speed, police officers stopping and searching young people and the sound of ambulances' sirens. Thinking it was nothing new we stepped

back into the house. It was only when we turned on the television that we realised what was happening. We then decided to take a walk towards the High Road to see for ourselves what was going on.

On our way to Tottenham High Road we passed by Bruce Grove station where several bins had been set on fire, barricading the street. There were glass and metal shards strewn across the street, and the stench of burning plastic was overwhelming. A line of riot policemen was blocking access to Tottenham High Road, so we decided to climb up the stairs of Bruce Grove station to gain a better view of the action. Standing on the station's platform we saw that several buildings had been set on fire, including Aldi supermarket and the local post office. As we were witnessing this scene of devastation an Asian man standing next to me commented jokingly, "The post office is burning, no giro for them". While the joke undoubtedly has all the connotations of a bad racial remark, its irony, or lack thereof, should not be overlooked. What this remark illustrates is that the targeting of buildings was not haphazard. As others have argued (Baldassare 1994; Herman 2013), in the course of riots, certain buildings are attacked because they carry both a symbolic and a tangible signification for participants.

As Millington (2016) has also noted, in Tottenham the violence of the participants was directed to specific buildings which embodied the process of structural violence that characterises everyday living in most of inner city London.⁶ The post office on Tottenham High Road, in a borough with one of the highest indexes of deprivation in London,⁷ was the centre of daily disputes and arguments over the handling and cashing of giro cheques and other benefits. Similarly the Job Centre Plus, the council offices and the police station were also targeted. Interestingly, none of the local shops were attacked. And this is not because, as the media reported widely, Turkish shopkeepers had organised self-defence groups that discouraged the crowd (Neild 2011), but rather because participants did not see these as spaces that reproduce everyday violence in the ways in which the other buildings did.

Here, our reading is focused on how the production of radical politics during this event is in a continuum with the daily violence exerted on people's lives. This is inscribed in indices of deprivation, lack of services provision, and poor housing. It is also, however, inscribed in the historical process of the economic, social and civic transformation of Tottenham and the wider Haringey borough, which, for over four decades, has been taking place under the slogan of "urban regeneration". Since the early 1970s, "urban regeneration" in Haringey, whether under labour or conservative governments, has meant the progressive erosion of state intervention and community based projects, in favour of private led investments (Dillon and Fanning 2011, 2015). In the mind of successive governments and different Greater London Authorities, from the early days, the main objective of these projects has been to "requalify" the area whilst driving economic growth and reducing unemployment (Damesick 1979; Dixon 2005). In concrete terms, and "concrete" here should be read as both the adjective and the noun that denotes the building material, this has resulted in the simultaneous processes of commodification and gentrification of the borough's public spaces (Freitas 1996; Miller et al. 1998). As in other parts of London and of Britain, which have been

the focus of large urban regeneration plans (Leary 2009; Watt 2013), in Haringey the urban landscape has been continuously transformed through the construction of large shopping malls, and property led regeneration projects. Where once there stood flourishing high street markets and small shops, the local authorities have supported large public–private investments in retail and housing. This is for example the case of the Wood Green Shopping City which was built in the 1970s and which came to replace an existing shopping district characterised by thriving local shops, street markets and other public amenities. The complex, which was hailed to become the “Heart of Haringey”, and was one of a number of new sub-urban centres intended to counteract the magnetic pull of Central London, never delivered on its original promises. A similar rhetoric has accompanied current regeneration plans for the borough. In the immediate aftermath of the riots, the new “Plan for Tottenham” (Haringey Council 2012), despite its emphasis on the need for community led regeneration projects and affordable housing, continued on the historical trajectory laid out in previous regeneration plans, by consigning Haringey’s public spaces to more real estate investments. Similarly to the development of the Wood Green Shopping City in the 1970s, the current regeneration plan around the new Tottenham Hotspur Stadium and housing complexes, will stand on the site of a row of small businesses that have been on Tottenham High Road for decades (Dillon and Fanning 2015; Panton and Walters 2018).

To make sense of the looting, arson and destruction that characterised the 2011 events, we need to approach these actions as the spatiotemporal political dynamic exerted by participants for the subversion and reclamation of everyday life in public space. This was a fight for the right to the negated everyday city as an assemblage of “agonistic” public spaces (Springer 2011). The fact, then, that the riots occurred in these specific spaces is no surprise, since “everyday forms and uses of public space ... inform those moments when extraordinary contestation becomes manifest” (Springer 2011:544). In his discussion of the 2011 UK riots, Tiratelli (2018:76) indicates that the “specific places in which the riots happened shaped their situational dynamics”. Public space in Tottenham and elsewhere in London is inherently violent and highly surveilled. The ubiquitous CCTV cameras that led to the identification and conviction of hundreds of participants in the space of a month (Ministry of Justice 2012) are proof of this. It is also highly exclusionary. The right to access it for political participation is always restricted by police control or mediated by the forms of representative democracy set out by the communitarian model of citizenship representation. In Tottenham and in other inner cities, this communitarian politics is best captured by the myriads of local, community, faith, ethnic, and youth associations.

Violent confrontations with the police, destructions, blockades, and street occupations, did not occur, then, solely in relation to deprivation, inequality, impoverishment, and lack of community cohesion, all of them pre-existing forms of violence. They were also grounded in the normalised everyday flows of the city (Al Sayed and Hanna 2013). In this regard, the riots in Tottenham were thus also fuelled by growing marginalisation, exclusion and displacement, which increasingly marked the participant’s daily engagement with the city (Dikeç 2017; Enright 2017). These tensions are not only manifest in Tottenham, but also

elsewhere in London, through the process of gentrification. In this sense, the term post-industrial city, which encompasses areas of inner cities like Tottenham with a marked industrial past, actually means relentless gentrification and refers to existing patterns of social, spatial and economic restructuring of the city (Davidson 2012; Davidson and Lees 2010; Watt 2013; Zukin 1987). Gentrification produces feelings of shame and anxiety for those who cannot keep up with the top-down planning and goals of the governing elites (Wallace 2015). This is an important dimension of the way in which we make sense of the politicisation of such spaces. Economic and statistical models for analysing the riots, both in relation to ideas of deprivation and the power of consumerism, cannot offer a concrete interpretation of their spatial dimension in the context of Tottenham. It is only when we juxtapose the political events of 2011 to these historical processes of urban transformation that the crucial aspect of the spatial, and of contested claims to it in the everyday, can be fully unveiled.

Apart from the pervasive presence of CCTV cameras, control of public spaces in Tottenham is also exerted through the presence of police forces that target local youth, mostly young black men, through the controversial method of “stop and search”. It is not therefore by chance that most of the participants who were interviewed as part of the Guardian/London School of Economics project, in an exhaustive survey, saw the riots as a way of getting back at the police. There was a sense that people were “revenging”. The fact that people felt in control is reflected in quotes such as, “we had [the police] under control”, and “we thought we’d just kind of violate just like they violate us” (The Guardian 2011). Beyond stop and search, the police also exerted their control through dispersal orders and by stopping people in the course of their daily lives, who were wearing hoodies or other “intimidating” or “concealing” garments. Although these measures could simply be interpreted as manifestation of the police force’s racism, they are also about policing the public space of the city and the right to occupy it. On the night of the riots, no dispersal orders could be enforced and hoods, and other forms of concealment were very conspicuous.

By emphasising the struggle for public space we also pay attention to solidarity among participants. Such solidarity is not simply based on the shared and localised memory of the Broadwater Farm riots of 1985.⁸ It is strongly associated with a continuous everyday victimisation of local residents that spans generations. That night, against readings of violence as expressions of nihilist, individualistic, and consumerist subjects, I witnessed solidarity on the streets of Tottenham. People were engaged in giving advice to participants, with older men and women encouraging them to “hold the line”, “don’t run”, and to “keep on”, because “the police are getting what they deserve”. Every time glasses or other objects hurled at the police hit their targets, the crowd cheered and jeered. Insults were shouted at the police. But there was also caring for one another. When the police charged, people were warned by residents standing in the stairwells of the local estates overlooking Tottenham High Road where to hide. Participants were also warned of other possible dangers. And against facile interpretations of the youth as disaffected and disrespectful, I saw much intergenerational support.

As Millington (2016) underlines, contrary to the narratives that present the Tottenham riots as apolitical, this event was central for the constituting of political subjectivities. For Millington (2016:714), the “discursive space” that hip-hop culture created “in which to practice citizenship” in the aftermath of the events, reflects the construction and the representation of “political subjectivities and spatialities”. Such practices, he asserts, create “novel alternatives to the traditional times and spaces of (urban) political subjectivation” by “affirm[ing] a series of unlikely and/or esoteric material and discursive spaces (including retail spaces)” (Millington 2016:720). It thus became apparent that the Tottenham riots witnessed the emergence of political subjects normally excluded from the public space set by representative democracy. In essence, the riots represented a political response to the representative political system’s failures to be democratically inclusive. They were the reflection of an emerging collective and spatial dynamic against the continuous antagonistic system of democracy, but were also “agonistic” (Springer 2011) in principle and practice since they reflected the attempt to claim public space and imagine new forms of politics against the exclusion produced by the gentrified inner city in its current neoliberal form (Dillon and Fanning 2015).⁹

Evental Public Space

In this paper, we provide an analysis of radical political events as spatiotemporal processes which engender transformative potential. To do so we have drawn on the critical relation between event and everyday life in order to offer a reading which puts forward their dynamic intertwining as essential in the contestation and (re)production of public space. The everyday spatiotemporal modalities of such events, as reflected in the (re)production of local knowledge and memory in the public spaces of Tottenham and Athens, reveal an essential operation at play. Such a process entails a de-normalisation of the ordinary,¹⁰ which thus implies a rupture with the past and with established organised experiences of the everyday (Badiou 2005). Within the context of public space, de-normalisation is constituted when, according to Dikeç (2005:172), space, through “a moment of interruption”, “becomes political in that it becomes the polemical place where a wrong can be addressed and equality can be demonstrated”. Space, then, “becomes an integral element of the interruption of the ‘natural’ (or, better yet, naturalized) order of domination through the constitution of a place of encounter by those that have no part in that order” (Dikeç 2005:172). Similarly, Springer (2011:555) refers to the “promise of public space” in that it engenders the possibility for the emergence of “a more radical democracy” (Springer 2011:528). Following Springer (2011:525), who recognises an emancipatory potential in “agonistic public space”, we consider its (re)production during the two events to reflect a radical potential for agonistic transformation. While public spaces provided visibility to collective action (Mitchell 2003), they also enacted a process of subversion of everyday dominant norms in situ, thus allowing for different and more inclusive forms of everyday interaction and sociality to take place.

Locality and memory play a critical role here. As we have attempted to demonstrate, during these events, actors negotiated, made use of and acted upon the materiality of public spaces based on existing local knowledge and meaning ascribed to them. Enright (2017:558) also argues that there is a “fundamental link—contingent, complex, and indirect, however—between socio-spatial conditions and political practices”, and considers that “[t]his localization of the political is not an impediment to revolt” (Enright 2017:566). In many ways such a process is inevitable since “knowledge is always emplaced and localised” (Crang and Thrift 2000:3). Appadurai’s (1996:178) view of locality as “primarily relational and contextual” is also particularly important here since it offers a way of understanding locality not merely as a spatial framework, but as also constituted through notions and practices of social interaction that acquire meaning within a certain context. It can then be argued that the actions of these emergent collectivities were inextricably related to the emplaced material, spatiotemporal and symbolic references, meanings, and knowledge at play in public space.

Drawing upon Casey (2004:32), who conceptualises (public) memory to be embodied in certain places, we argue that the transformation of public space, as an essential operation in the context of the event, entails a process of utilising existing memories as a way of (re)ascribing meanings to public spaces. In many ways, these (re)ascribed meanings contest and oppose official narratives and histories. As we showed with our examples, memories and symbolisms associated with specific places contributed to the production of various forms of collective action, from demonstrations, assemblies and occupations to violent confrontations with the police and attacks on buildings. In Greece, this was evident in the use of universities, high-schools, municipal buildings, and other public spaces to contest official processes and narratives, but also in the attack on police stations, banks, multinational companies, and government buildings which are associated with everyday injustices and inequality. In Tottenham, the attack on municipal and retail sites reflected an attempt to unmask the deep effect that such spaces have in the reproduction of everyday structural violence in local communities.

By re-codifying existing schemes of memory and local knowledge that which has been conceptualised as normal is challenged. Here, we argue that de-normalisation is necessary for new knowledge to be produced, or in our situation, the possibility of a new way of doing politics altogether. Therein lies the paradox. The emergence of the event is contingent upon the coexistence of two supposedly antithetical operations: the ordinary, as the essential framework of already existing knowledge and experience, and the extraordinary, as the necessary step for the creation of the event as such.

While collective action during the event is firmly rooted in the everyday uses of (public) space—in the representations, symbolisms, and meanings ascribed to it—such practices also reflect a rupture with the past. A powerful manifestation of such a rupturing process was indicated by the slogan “Fuck May 68, Fight Now” which appeared during the December revolt in Athens. This rupturing process reflects a deep entanglement between everyday life, space, time, and the dynamics of the unexpected (Bassett 2008:907). The event, as a “moment of rupture in time and space” (Bassett 2008:895; see also Badiou 2005), also implies a

transformation in the way the subject acts in relation to past situations. It only represents a rupture if it indicates a re-reading of the past, and thus a reconfiguration of the ways in which the past is (re)inscribed on space in the present, since “[t]he place or space of events ... is itself active in the event” (Kapferer 2015:20). To act within the event, then, means to re-situate oneself in public space, but also to manifest practices which can potentially transform and challenge already existing meanings and positionalities. During and through these acts of collective resistance and struggle, new modes of knowledge and sociality emerged which challenged previous schemes of mediated interaction with urban public space and the city. The question of what constitutes an event should therefore be embedded with inquiries that take into consideration the spatiotemporal registers around which such an event can emerge. Here, such a perspective is connected with the idea that “insurgent democratic politics ... are precisely about bringing into being or spatialising what is already promised by the very principle upon which the political is constituted, i.e. equalitarian emancipation” (Swyngedouw 2014:129).

Seen from this point of view, these practices reveal a reading which challenges the clearly defined distinction between the ordinary and the extraordinary. When Das (2007:8) argues that the everyday is “eventful”, she also puts forward a critical understanding of the event “as always attached to the ordinary” (Das 2007:7). Hence, our examination of radical political events through a spatiotemporal analytical lens ascribes new significance to the question *what is an event*, by pointing to the role that public space has in its emergence and constitution. We have tried to answer this question by looking at the production of public space during these events, as well as the public manifestation of collective actions against the antagonism and competition that permeate everyday structures of representative democracy. By problematising the clear cut dichotomy between the ordinary and the extraordinary we also highlighted the ways in which ideas of memory, imagination, symbolism, and locality play out during such events, and thus, conceptualised the radical (re)production of public space as contingent on the processual interrelation between event and everyday life.¹¹

Conclusion

In 1979, Foucault (2000:449) stated that “revolts belong to history. But in a certain way, they escape from it”. Such a quasi-paradoxical view of revolts is best encapsulated in the spatiotemporal practices which emerge within such events. In this paper we attempted to demonstrate that the radical political practices which emerged during these two situations grounded their political dynamic in everyday life. What makes them extraordinary is not merely the fact that they exceeded the ordinary, but also, the fact that local knowledge, (public) memory, and past experiences were formative of this surpassing.

What we call radical political practices in the context of the two events is a political dynamic which has not only developed away from official institutionalised frameworks, but whose essential features are deeply rooted in everyday experiences of the city. This, we argue, is evident in the way that public space was used

during these events. The reproduction of memory, the local ties which informed collective action, and the everydayness which was constitutive of its modes of socialisation are compelling examples that point to the connections between this political phenomenon and everyday modes of social and spatial practices. This strong association of radical politics with public space should also serve as a reminder that despite the sustained attack on it and its constant diminishing by neoliberal forces and the state across various scales, “spontaneous and organized political response always carries within it the capability of remaking and retaking public space and the public sphere” (Low and Smith 2006:16).

In Greece, the attempt by state authorities and mainstream intellectuals to characterise the novel political paradigm that emerged during the December revolt as apolitical and evidence of anomie has been fully debunked both by the discourses of participants themselves and also by various political and social analyses.¹² In the UK, however, there has been an extensive literature on the August 2011 riots, which often stresses their apolitical nature. The summer riots, the argument goes, were the expression of nihilism, the actions of disaffected youths driven by consumerism and its alienating forces (Hall 2012; Moxon 2011; Treadwell et al. 2013). If a political commentary emerged, it was to represent the riots as the manifestation of neo-liberal capitalism and “consumerist desire” (Žižek 2011), and its participants as “defective and disqualified consumers” (Bauman 2011). To the contrary, as we showed in this paper, both events were the expressions of emerging radical politics in public space. Further, growing out of the quotidian rather than a vacuum, they worked to once more situate politics in the heart of the everyday.

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Endnotes

¹ See Dalakoglou (2012) for a discussion on spontaneity within the context of collective protests in Athens.

² Gardiner (2000:16) also notes that “To a certain extent, the everyday has this resistant quality ... it remains an inchoate and heterodox mix of fluid, multiple and symbolically dense practices and thoughts, a ‘black rock that resists assimilation’ (de Certeau 1984:60)”.

³ Slogan written on wall in Kallidromiou St, Exarcheia (Charitatos-Synodinou 2010:63).

⁴ *Kanonikotita* was a term employed by participants during the 2008 events to refer to the normalisation of everyday injustices and exclusions associated with the material and the symbolic fabric of political authority, neoliberal capitalism, and commodification.

⁵ *Metapolitefsi* is a term used to denote the political period in Greece after the fall of the Junta in 1974.

⁶ On the association between the “destruction of one’s own neighbourhood in protest and “societal marginalization”, see also Davidson and Iveson (2015:554).

⁷ The 2010 “Index of Multiple Deprivation” listed Haringey as the 4th most deprived borough in London, and the 13th (out of 326) most deprived authority in England (<https://>

www.haringey.gov.uk/sites/haringeygovuk/files/indices_of_deprivation_2010.pdf [last accessed 25 November 2020].

⁸ See Smith (2013) for a critique on the discourses of historical continuities in riots.

⁹ As Enright (2017:569) argues, the riots “were used as justification throughout 2011 and 2012 for extreme forms of securitized repression in advance of and at the Games”.

¹⁰ See Gardiner (2000:19–20) and Highmore (2002a) for a discussion on defamiliarisation and denaturalisation in relation to everyday life.

¹¹ Felski (2000:84) also recognises that “acts of innovation and creativity are not opposed to, but rather made possible by, the mundane cycles of the quotidian”.

¹² For a detailed analysis of this debate, see Sotiris (2013).

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