First We Take Manhattan…

written by Despina Lalaki | March 24, 2015

Since the pressures of international financial capital and its subservient political elites will continue with the same if not greater intensity, it is also certain that a new cycle of social mobilization in Greece and the rest of Europe will begin again. Today, when social movements are "internationalized" mainly through the internet, what role could the communities of the Greek diaspora play in faraway cities, such as New York, cities of great importance for the flow and concentration of financial capital that are registered in our collective imaginary for every possible reason other than their role in the history of social movements?

Since the elections of 2012, the meteoric rise of Syriza has generated a wave of enthusiasm – at home and abroad – expressed by the proliferation of grassroots groups and organizations rallying in Syriza's support, against the rise of fascism in Greece and Europe at large and the authoritarian practices of the Greek government such as the overnight shutdown of ERT (Greece's public broadcasting network). In what felt almost like a chain reaction, nearly every European capital appeared that it would get its own Syriza branch while smaller Greek radical left parties such as Antarsya (Front of the Greek Anticapitalist Left) followed suit organizing marches, protests, conferences and open public discussions in universities and other forums.

On the other side of the Atlantic

The organizing force behind all these rather small groups has been diaspora Greeks who have either lived and worked abroad for decades or migrated recently as a result of the economic pressures back home. The phenomenon has been repeated even across the Atlantic. In February 2012 a gathering at Zuccotti Park in New York City, in response to what was meant to be an international solidarity action under the cry "We Are All Greeks" gave rise to the establishment of three different groups: AKNY (Left Movement NY) – Greece Solidarity Movement, Syriza-NY and Antarsya-US.

The impact these groups, as collective subjects, may have in the broader fight for social change is certainly unclear. Yet, it appears as if they work like small centripetal forces around which various fragments of the European and American Left flock, inspired by the historical possibilities the rise of a Left party in power brings. Similar are the effects of the rise of Podemos which, transcending the local and particular circumstances of Spain, has generated trans-national networks and organizations enabled by the presence of Spaniards abroad. Whether these groups – all rather diverse in their practices, organizational structure, ideological orientation and immediate goals and objectives – will be able to galvanize greater movements back home or abroad remains to be seen. Some facets of their particular conditions, however, beg for more attention: the diasporic aspect, already mentioned, as constitutive force of their organization, and a strong urban element which, on various levels, plays an important role in the emergence of a new global political geography.

In our day, social movements' actions and radical political changes, thanks to the internet and the social media, rapidly reverberate across large geographical scales. The movement of the squares of 2011, encompassing the indignados in Spain and Greece and Occupy Wall Street in the US, the Egyptian Revolution and the Turkish uprising, the revolts in Tunisia and Syria, the Hong Kong or Sao Paulo protests, the rise of Podemos in Spain and Syriza's ascendance to power are all closely

interconnected in our political imaginary. A global struggle for real democracy is taking place and in the process a global change of consciousness is well under way, extending far beyond the political, geographical and ideological spaces of the cities which first ignited it.

The urban element and the Global Cities according to S. Sassen

The historically-proven importance of the urban element in constituting social movements once again appears to play a great role. Global cities – a term largely popularized by sociologist Saskia Sassen in her 1991 book *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* – recognized as such primarily for their importance as nodes in the global economic system, constitute also relational conduits where movements connect and develop. Global are the cities where not only financial capital meets and decision-making institutions are located but also sites where new actual physical social relationships are forged and in which potential protesters, activists and radical scholars are implicated. Athens, Cairo, New York, Istanbul or Madrid set a new global political agenda and for that reason alone can be indexed as 'global cities.'

Diasporic communities and social movements

Global cities occupy a central position in the transnational social, cultural and political networks, networks which are made up of nomadic social actors, various kinds of diasporas – small-minded nationals as well as internationally-minded professionals, workers, scholars, researchers, activists and so forth. Transnational social movements, as well, are enabled by electronic networks and weak-tie connections which facilitate the transmission of information but are enacted by social actors on the ground, individuals in direct contact forging actual relationships and strong ties while connecting and coordinating their actions. Individuals and groups moving within and between large urban centers form nodes in relational networks that can connect struggles over distant lands.

AKNY, Antarsya-US, and Syriza-NY, organizations with which I am most familiar, are diaspora-based organizations working not only to popularize the struggles of the Greek people back home but to build connections and solidarity with organizations, groups and individuals that fight similar fights in New York City and the US. New York, home to a large Greek diaspora, is also home to various forces of the American radical Left which have been closely following the recent political developments across the Atlantic. Greece has ignited the Left's political imagination around the world, often to the astonishment of the people of the Greek Left who may be more reserved or more cautious in their optimism at the moment. From New York City, the epicenter of world capitalism and source of tremendous symbolic power, modest diasporic networks can capitalize on the prestige that the city emanates, increasing the visibility of their struggles, expanding their influence and potentially building strong counter-hegemonic organizational structures. If nothing else, the results of the recent negotiations between the Greek government and the Troika suggest that international solidarity and mobilization may be key to not only avoiding further capitulation but to developing a strong front against the continuous onslaughts of finance capital in Greece and beyond.

New York, for instance, thousands of miles away from any European city, for a long time loomed large in European's imagination, mostly as a hub of high lifestyle, high culture and conspicuous consumption. Yet, the several hundred people who, in 2011, gathered, rather spontaneously, at the small 'privately owned public square' of Zuccotti – formerly called Liberty Plaza Park – reminded us at whose expense that lifestyle was forged and specified exactly how few people it concerned. Symbols, along with changing consciousness, or probably because of it, are subject to change as well. On January 22nd, when Pablo Iglesias, the General Secretary of Podemos addressed Syriza's supporters at the party's preelection rally at Omonia Square by opening his speech with Leonard Cohen's: "First We Take Manhattan, Then We Take Berlin…" might have had in mind something along these lines.

Note: This article was previously published in Greek in *Ενθέματα Αυγής*, *https://enthemata.wordpress.com,* March 15, 2015.

Despina Lalaki is a Sociologist and Visiting Research Fellow at The Center for the Study of Culture, Technology and Work, CUNY, The Graduate Center.