

With Gramsci in the Southern park: moments of hegemonic green planning in Athens

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Abstract

Throughout 19th and early 20th century, urban parks signified and spatialized ‘the good urban life’ in the cities of modernity. More than a century later, urban parks continue to contribute to hegemonic significations of ‘the good urban life’ of the early 21st century and the necessity of specific urban (re)development projects in an ever-expanding urbanizing world. This chapter is about urban planning of green spaces in Athens as a component of shifting hegemonic projects concerning the nation-state and its capital. Through *Pedion Areos* park in the city of Athens, an emblematic yet continuously contested green area in the urban core, we are trying to explore how key intellectual works and institutional (re)arrangements envision and plan urban green spaces and situate these imaginations and plans in their social and political context of a ‘modern’ ‘European’ (quasi-?) Southern / SouthEastern metropolis.

In doing so, we select two different ‘critical moments’ in the history of the city’s urban (metropolitan) development, both involving important initiatives for establishing and renewing urban green.

The first moment is during the 1920s and 1930s, when Greece’s borders are settled through the Lausanne Treaty and both the country and the city are en route to become – in material but also in imaginary ways – part of the European project of modernity. Yet at the same time, this modernization went ahead in quite ambivalent and incomplete ways, while Athens was rapidly transforming due to the reception of hundreds of thousands refugees from Asia Minor and thousands others migrating from the countryside. Since then, Athens has been developing as a metropolis of the South / SouthEast within the West, inherently not ‘fitting in’ the ideal European city models.

The second is during the 2000s and 2010s, when a period of economic growth and massive immigration in the years around the 2004 Olympics was ‘suddenly’ interrupted by economic crisis and stagnation. This is yet another time when Athens, as the European South becomes ‘South’ or ‘South-Eastern’ regarding its political, social and material conditions as the adopted crisis management entailed disciplinary lessons to be taught by the ‘knowledgeable’ (and wealthy) ‘North’ and the imposition of the MoUs resonates clearly with former structural adjustment programmes.

Despite their obviously different historical contexts, these two moments were marked by severe recession episodes amidst periods of economic expansion and by conditions of intense polarization in the field of political competition. Both were critical to the city’s trajectory but also to the history of the urban park of *Pedion Areos* we focus on, since the latter was largely designed and started to operate in the first period and rehabilitated and rebranded, after some years of closure, in the second. Significantly, both moments illustrate how Athens remains a Southern / South-Eastern metropolis, adopting but also contesting local and international imaginaries of Western modernity and modernization.

Our theoretical ground is provided by the Gramscian conception of civil society that is essential in developing a common sense sustaining specific hegemonic projects, in parallel with coercion exercised by the political society of the state. We also follow Jessop’s neo-Gramscian discussion on

urban regimes and their operation through links with local hegemonic blocks. In Gramsci's words, 'intellectuals are the dominant group's "deputies" exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government' (1971: 12). Jessop (1997) comments that this 'inclusive sense' of the state is 'highly relevant to local politics because it downplays the importance of sovereign states with their monopoly of coercion and allows more weight to other apparatuses, organizations, and practices involved in exercising political power'. Furthermore, after conceptualizing urban governance as relevant to 'the channels through which diverse state projects are pursued and indeed modified', he urges to a consideration of how hegemony works at the subnational level.

Moreover, our analysis is framed by theorizations from and of the South / South-East and their insights in discerning variegated hegemonic projects. As Yiftachel and Mammon (2022) point out 'this [SouthEastern] distinction draws on differences between the two prevalent axes of power relations: the North-South axis denotes mainly economic exploitation and stratification, and the East-West (Occident-Orient) axis alludes mainly to a gradation of identities and cultures. These are not discrete or binary economic-cultural categories, but rather dynamic 'diagonal assemblages' which combine economic, institutional, and political domination and resistance, through which urban societies and relations have been shaped and stratified over recent decades'.

Our empirical investigation is accordingly directed a. to intellectuals' public discourses, i.e. the examination of key texts (speech-acts) produced by local and national politicians, journalists and planning experts and b. to the institutionalized actors that undertake the urban greening endeavors and the rules that regulate their actions. For this purpose we apply critical discourse analysis to articles in newspapers and web media and critical policy analysis in reviewing legislation respectively. The specific questions that we explore with this twofold investigation are the following: What are the social functions and uses prescribed for urban parks in Athens? Which imaginaries, aesthetic values are incorporated in their design and what types of social organization they foster? How social functions and aesthetics interweave with political visions at the local or the national level? How is the public perceived, who is included and who is excluded from it and on which preconditions? Which coalitions of intellectuals emerge and who are their opponents? Who is responsible to govern urban parks and how their governance corresponds with local and national politics?

'Excavating' Pedion Areos park allows a closer analysis of the rhetorical devices and the institutional tools that, in combination, contribute to the common sense about the character and meaning of public green. In more detail, we argue that during the first period urban greening was a means to promote a certain bourgeois ideal for urban gardens, in hand with the need to renew the grand nationalist narrative after the collapse of the irredentist state ideology. A coalition of politicians, architects, urban planners and journalists consistently propagated the idea that the capital of Greece should be immediately equipped with more green areas, for reasons of common interest, social functionality in terms of recreation and hygiene, and visual harmony. They also presented their activities as a struggle not only against sluggish bureaucracies and competing interests on urban land, but also as a mission against backward looking perceptions of the national fate. Instead, they understood the urban park as an invitation to the national body to revise itself as a modern future-oriented society. Moreover, they were in favor of administrative transformations and rescaling that would provide the city with efficient tools for planning and implementing green space. They were also able to cross the boundaries of existing political rivalries and build new forms of assent, however unstable, on urban development.

Almost one century later, the politicians' and planners' priority was to regenerate and revitalize the deteriorating urban core of the capital and reactivate local real estate market, with special considerations over urban security concerns and a new neoliberalized cultural economy based on

spectacle. Urban deterioration is understood by local politicians in terms of an all-encompassing and urgent crisis, as when the ‘environment’ is described as the ‘second bomb (after economy) that may explode in our hands’. The ‘social ills’ of marginality, homelessness, migration and drug-addiction in *Pedion Areos* are considered big enough to close down the park altogether for years and its re-establishment is celebrated as giving the city the ‘kiss of life’. The green renewal is certainly emphasized, but the crisis discourse also invokes an outdated overtone of a civilizing mission for the urban green, since a ‘park culture’ is considered missing among the locals. At the same time, avant-garde digital art exhibitions seem to experiment with innovative understandings of what park culture and public green means. The re-establishment of commercialized recreation activities is deemed as equally important to increased policing (following a memorandum between the regional authority and the Ministry of Citizen Protection), if it is to fill the void that otherwise risks to be overwhelmed with anomie. Again, such concerns are able to transcend the boundaries of the political spectrum and call for a rescaling of the administrative responsibilities, towards delegating more powers to local institutions and involving the private sector in the management of the park.

In both ‘moments’ urban green planning has been not only about greening and revitalizing the city, but also about creating grey zones of spatial inclusion/exclusion for urbanites. A level of coercion is repeatedly present there, as a necessary complement to consent. Coercion, not merely in the form of policing but also through other administrative means that impose physical and virtual borders, is reserved for those who either passively or actively fail to conform with hegemonic projects.

Urban greening in Athens incorporates and reveals the conditions of partial success and partial failure of spatial hegemonic projects. Outcomes are influenced by the development of counter-hegemonic projects and the study of these outcomes is always helpful when it comes to imagining counter-hegemonic strategies.

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