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## UNSETTLED 'PUBLICNESS' AND THE EMBODIED APPROPRIATION OF IKTINOUS STREET IN THESSALONIKI

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### Introduction

During the 2010 financial crisis in Greece, Thessaloniki experienced deep transformations, which materialized in multiple ways in the city's public spaces—for example, in increased homelessness, drug use and visible urban poverty, lack of maintenance, as well as in moments of insurgence and initiatives of collective action and solidarity. The young were deeply impacted by the crisis, specifically through a dramatic rise in unemployment. In Thessaloniki's region of Macedonia–Thrace, unemployment in the general public was 23.1% in 2016, while it reached record numbers of 45.2% in ages 15–24 and 30.2% in ages 25–34 (ELSTAT 2017).

Research on the effects of austerity politics on the production of public space in Greek cities has documented a plethora of transformations. For instance, austerity politics has resulted in the increasing presence of urban poverty (Kaika 2012) and temporary spatialities of solidarity, resistance and insurgence (Arampatzi 2017; Kaika and Karaliotas 2014; Vaiou and Kalandides 2016). Concurrently, reduced state funding for local government has opened the private sector's opportunity for further penetration into the management and regeneration of public spaces (Athanassiou 2017; Athanassiou et al. 2018). In this context, the use of public space also changed, and a new contested and heterogeneous geography of youth culture was produced. Teenagers and young people started to hang out in squares and pedestrianized streets in the evening, instead of frequenting bars and cafés.

This chapter focuses on this new urban routine performed in public spaces by groups of young people in Thessaloniki, and the ways it has been confronted by formal municipal policies and other actors. In so doing, I seek to contribute to the discussion of the dialectics of settled urban routines and unsettling moments of disruption in two ways. First, I study spontaneous everyday practices of the

young and discuss them as an embodied appropriation of streets and squares, unsettling the dominant paradigm of public space. Second, the chapter presents multiple ways through which this dominant paradigm has been discursively and materially produced and reproduced locally, by multiple actors in dialectic encounter with global trends. Hence, austerity politics performed at different spatial levels during the crisis are understood as entangled with everyday embodied praxis and lived spaces.

The chapter engages briefly with theoretical discourses regarding the dominant paradigm of public space as produced within neoliberal urbanization processes. The discussion then highlights how young people are a prominent, yet often marginalized, user group of public space. The case study of Iktinou and Zefxidos streets in the city center is chosen as a controversial case of embodied appropriation of public space, which consolidated into formal policies of repression and, ultimately, spatial reconstruction. Data was collected using a combination of primary research methods:

- personal observation;
- eight semi-structured interviews of different involved groups (young users of Iktinou and Zefxidos streets, bar owners, one resident and one employee at a convenience store), which were conducted during March and April 2017 in cafés or outdoors on the two streets;
- research on the local press and official municipal documents.

### **Narrow 'Publicness'**

Within the context of neoliberal urbanization processes, there is a dominant paradigm of public space, roughly defined by the virtues of liveliness, attractiveness and safety (Mitchell 2003; Zukin 1995). A vibrant street life is seen as not only promoting safety but also facilitating consumption, economic activity and urban competitiveness in the global market. In recent years, cappuccino drinking in pavement cafés has become the icon of an attractive urban environment (Zukin 1995) and the goal of urban regeneration schemes. Intensive use of public space is encouraged through attractive design and events programming which are often provided, managed, maintained or safeguarded by private companies or through various types of partnerships between local authorities, community associations and the corporate sector (Carmona et al. 2008; Zukin 1995). Recent research has focused on how this diversified involvement of different actors in public space production affects the public nature, i.e. 'publicness' of streets and squares (Langstraat and van Melik 2013; Nemeth and Schmidt 2011).

The dominant paradigm of 'clean and safe' public space encourages the presence of 'normal' users, while it restricts 'undesireable' uses and users (Mitchell and Staeheli 2006)—what Zukin (1995: 28) refers to as "pacification by cappuccino". Such 'undesirable' users and activities typically comprise the homeless,

drug users, unauthorized street vendors and activities like picketing, protesting or even busking and loitering (Mitchell 2003). They are seen as antagonistic to the dominant paradigm and are often regulated against, totally forbidden and even legally prosecuted. Moreover, a depoliticized paradigm is produced substituting safety for universal access and neoliberal participatory experiments for the right to use, inhabit and change the city. The concomitant exclusionary practices aim to safeguard the use of public space for consumption and leisure, often undermining its political role.

Within such narrowly understood ‘publicness’, the presence of young people, particularly those in adolescence and early twenties, is often seen as a threat and, in many countries, has been treated with curfews, ticketing, surveillance and policing (Travlou 2003). Young people are not of course a homogeneous group, but rather a “fragmented mass” (Bayat 2010: 119) and differ from each other, in terms of age, gender, class and ethnicity. However, they share a collective identity which is built through school and the media as well through “passive networks”, i.e. “by sensing their commonalities through such methods as recognizing similar hairstyles, blue jeans, hang-out places, food, fashions, and the pursuit of public fun” (ibid.: 19). Young people also share a minimal role in institutionalized participation processes of the production of urban space and, hence, their spatial needs and desires are marginalized in the formal design of public spaces.

Research on children’s and teenagers’ perceptions and use of public space (e.g. see: Hart 1979; Lynch 1977; Matthews et al. 1998; Ward 1978) documented that the young often defy urban design intentions and demarcations and establish new spontaneous ‘microgeographies’ in the city (Matthews et al. 1998). These unplanned ‘microgeographies’ are ingrained in the formal network of public spaces creating new epicenters of activity and vividness, enabling new encounters, practicing new routines and temporalities—often clashing with formally designated uses and dominant conceptions of public space. Young people’s activities and spontaneous use of public space are often portrayed by residents, shopkeepers and the local media as unruly, noisy, deviant or dangerous.

The *botellon* phenomenon in Spain is a telling example. Mature adolescents and young people in their early twenties hang out in squares and streets on Fridays and Saturdays drinking alcohol and playing music, instead of consuming in bars and cafés. Nearby residents complain about noise and the litter that revelers leave behind. In Spain, the *botellon* exploded in the 1990s and has its roots in anti-Francoist gatherings back in the 1970s. This loud, unruly and vibrant use of public space has caused a lot of controversies and public debate and has been treated with a number of restrictive measures such as intensive policing, restrictions in alcohol selling and finally a ban on drinking in public spaces, except for specially designated public spaces—the ‘botellondromes’—where it is permitted (see Pedrero-Garcia 2018; Rodriguez-Martos 2006).

*Botellon*, like skateboarding and loitering, has been routinely portrayed in the media as deviant while research has focused primarily on related adolescent alcohol drinking, and cannabis use (e.g. see: Pedrero-Garcia 2018;

Rodriguez-Martos 2006). While noisy and challenging in residential areas, *botellon* is also not producing revenue and antagonizes other, more traditional and sanctioned, hospitality and leisure uses. *Botellon* is incongruous to the dominant paradigm of public space involving experiences of urban life at cool pavement cafés, bars, busy pop-up food markets, restaurants and open-air festivals. The bodies that occupy the steps and ledges of Spanish squares, however, can be seen as constantly producing an alternative 'publicness'. A 'publicness' that questions the assumed order and brings about controversy and conflict, not through momentary acts of insurgence or dissent but through everyday acts of embodied appropriation. Although not organized as collectives or sharing common political ideologies, Asef Bayat (2010) argues, simply through their presence and their everyday routines, the young assert the 'youth habitus', i.e. "a series of dispositions, ways of being, feeling, and carrying oneself (e.g. a greater tendency for experimentation, adventurism, idealism, autonomy, mobility, and change) that are associated with the sociological fact of 'being young'" (2010: 118). Their actions, just like other subaltern groups' actions, are identified by Bayat as 'nonmovements', i.e. "collective actions of noncollective actors; they embody shared practices of large numbers of ordinary people whose fragmented but similar activities trigger much social change, even though these practices are rarely guided by an ideology or recognizable leaderships and organizations" (ibid.: 14). Drawing on "a dialectic between 'the end of public space' and its beginning" (Mitchell 2003: 36) this chapter uses the example of outdoor partying by the young in Thessaloniki to discuss how everyday practices routinely performed by bodies, which are simultaneously individual and collective, may unsettle the dominant paradigm, bring about conflict and assert an alternative 'publicness'.

### Unsettling 'Publicness'

Notwithstanding the financial crisis, the Municipality of Thessaloniki actively sought to increase the city's share of public spaces, to reclaim space for pedestrians back from car traffic and to intensify the use of public spaces through open-air events and participatory enterprises. Due to shrinking state funding, the Municipality initiated a multifaceted collaboration with the corporate sector as well as the city's different citizen groups, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and professional organizations, while discursively relating to the unequivocal quest for competitiveness in the global economy and the economic vitality of local businesses (Athanassiou 2017; Athanassiou et al. 2018). Private companies became involved in the management, refurbishment and maintenance of central public spaces. The first such case was *What's Up Park*, which was a municipal park transformed into an activity park by the leading mobile telephony company in Greece (Athanassiou 2017). Citizen groups, like the *Friends of the New Waterfront*, and associations like the local branch of the *Young Men's Christian Association* (YMCA) have also allied with the Municipality for maintenance, cleaning, tree-planting and organizing cultural events in public spaces. Finally, the Municipality has

been active in regulating central public spaces, banning, for example, political campaigns from Thessaloniki's central Aristotelous Square, which traditionally hosted all political campaigns. This ban aimed at safeguarding the unobstructed function of the city's central commercial area (ibid.). What kind of unsettling and transformative effects does the Greek version of the *botellon* have on the dominant paradigm of public space that the Municipality of Thessaloniki has sought to settle?

The use of public space for evening leisure by young people, mostly in their late adolescence and early twenties, has in recent years created a new urban routine. One of the spots where young crowds gather in the evening—to hang out, drink alcohol and often play music—are Iktinou and Zefxidos streets, two intersecting streets located at the heart of the historic center. The streets were pedestrianized in the early 1980s and have since attracted an increasing number of restaurants, cafés and bars. It is a densely built area with a permissible floor area ratio of 4.8 and designated for 'central uses'. The streets are characterized by a highly permeable frontage with successive shop windows and entrances to apartment buildings. Ground floor land uses comprise six cafés and bars, three restaurants, fast-food restaurants and bakeries, retail shops and services. There is also a school complex and a public building hosting the Engineers' Pension Fund. It is a remarkable mix of uses, given that Iktinou street stretches for just over 170 meters and Zefxidos for 70 meters. Upper floors host some offices and medical practices but mainly residences.

Cafés and restaurants occupy an increasing percentage of the streets' width with pavement sitting and shading devices (see Figure 4.1). This type of occupation of public space by private enterprises is regulated by the Municipality,



**FIGURE 4.1** Iktinou street's many cafés and restaurants occupying a large part of the street's width for outdoor sitting.

Source: Evangelia Athanassiou, 2017.

which rents out specific areas for an annual fee. Securing both an income and an attractive image of vibrant street life, the Municipality has been notoriously lax in controlling the expansion of pavement cafés in public space, especially along Iktinou street. In 2009, residents complained the expansion of cafés was far exceeding the legally assigned areas and was also obtrusive to the function of the local school complex (Zouka 2009). Outdoor café facilities were also blocking the necessary emergency lane to ambulances and fire vehicles, as was often reported in the local press (*ibid.*). Residents and the school's parent association had repeatedly protested the expansion of the cafés, addressing the traffic police, the municipality and the Greek ombudsman.

According to an Iktinou street frequenter (female university student aged 22, personal interview, April 2017), the gathering of the young in Iktinou started with a group of around 30 people who moved from another pedestrianized street, Dimitriou Gounari, to avoid the violent incidents caused there by drug users. That first group shared a common leftist-anarchist ideology and, as the interviewee stated, moving to Iktinou was for them a conscious act of asserting their right to use public space. Soon many more young people joined, gradually assembling a more diversified and noisier crowd. Young people from around the city, especially from the city center, were sitting on the few available benches and stone ledges around the greenery and leaning against the fence of the schools' yard. They were mostly gathering at the intersection of the two streets in front of the school complex, a space free from outdoor seating for cafés (see Figure 4.2). People frequenting Iktinou street ranged from mid-teens to their early 20s, both Greek and migrants, from around the city (Iktinou street frequenter, female university student aged 20, personal interview, March 2017). They used to meet there drinking



**FIGURE 4.2** Friday night in Iktinou.

*Source:* Antigone Avdi, 2017.

alcohol, listening to or playing music between 9 p.m. and 4 a.m. As the same frequenter commented, “often it was impossible to go through Iktinou street” (ibid.).

All four interviewed young frequenters said that, between spring and autumn, they preferred to spend their evenings in public space, rather than in bars and cafés. The reasons they mentioned were:

- a sense of freedom from a predefined space, use, style, music or rules of behavior,
- the chance of meeting up with more people, friends and acquaintances than in a bar,
- a conscious claim of their right to the use of public space,
- spending less money.

The latter had become a pressing necessity during the crisis. It was not, however, the first reason mentioned by any of the interviewees. Asked why they chose the particular streets, interviewees replied that they and their friends chose Iktinou and Zefxidos because of their central location as well as their friendly design that allowed the use of ledges for sitting. As one of the street frequenters suggested “it is very cozy here, it is like an open embrace” (female university student aged 22, personal interview, April 2017). Young Iktinou frequenters that were interviewed said they did not feel any danger or sense of insecurity (Iktinou street frequenters, female university student aged 20, female university student aged 22, male high-school student aged 17, personal interview, March–April 2017). They reported there was occasional cannabis smoking and no other drug use or dealing. Fights, they said, were very rare. They admitted that the levels of noise were high, due to people’s voices and sometimes music.

Shop owners, however, depicted a different picture during interviews. Owners of bars and cafés with outdoor sitting facilities were frustrated with people gathering. They did acknowledge the right of the people to use public space. However, they reported increasing incidents of delinquency, from drug use and dealing, underage alcohol use and fights, to graffiti, littering and urinating in public space and even in the schoolyard (bar owners, male, aged 43, 50, 53, personal interview, April 2017). They felt the Municipality had not responded to what they were experiencing as a problem (male bar owner aged 53, personal interview, April 2017). The Municipality had, however, intensified cleaning services, which happened very early in the morning. Owners of bars and cafés believed that their business had been degraded since this phenomenon started as it turned the street from a cool upmarket area catering to the middle class to an area addressing an audience of a lower societal ranking (bar owners, male, aged 43, 53, personal interview, March and April 2017). One of the bar owners (male aged 53, personal interview, April 2017) implied that people gathering in Iktinou, and the reluctance of the authorities to control them, was part of a plan to further reduce property values, so that the area could change hands and be redeveloped. He believed that regulation of outdoor sitting facilities was too restrictive and that the fee they had to pay was too high. All these combined with the crisis, reduced prices and



reduced consumption created a dire situation for their businesses. They believed that they should be actively supported by the local authorities, for instance, by allowing outdoor sitting to expand, toward the area where the revelers hang out. This would have reduced space available for the young crowd and gradually push them away, one of the interviewees suggested (*ibid.*).

Nevertheless, businesses took advantage of the trend, selling takeaway drinks at lower prices. An employee at a convenience store (female aged 28, personal interview, April 2017) said their business was positively affected by the trend. She could understand, however, why residents were annoyed. In the evenings, she said, they always made sure there was a man serving at their store, as a woman would feel insecure to serve the revelers who often caused fights. She, personally, worked only in the morning shifts.

Residents often called the police and complained about the noise which would go on until early in the morning and comprised, apart from talking, fights and loud music by guitars or sound systems (male resident aged 50, personal interview, April 2017). Extensive graffiti and rubbish were also described during interviews as a problem. There had also been incidents, like throwing buckets of water and even eggs from a balcony against the young crowd, reported one of the street frequenters (female university student aged 22, personal interview, April 2017). Residents allied with shop owners and created a petition demanding action by the local authorities and the police to restrict the revelers. They also intervened at the municipal council.

Shop owners who were interviewed agreed that the police were not doing anything to stop the problem and they did not even respond promptly when called upon for an emergency (male bar owner aged 53, personal interview, April 2017). The police, however, as observed during fieldwork and reported by young interviewees, were regularly patrolling the area. Feelings regarding their presence were mixed among the interviewees. One was very frustrated about it saying it was unacceptable to have to carry an ID to use public space. She also implied that there was a level of discrimination on behalf of the police who tended to ask for ID mostly from migrants (Iktinou street frequenter, female university student aged 20, personal interview, March 2017). Another interviewee was not annoyed about the police presence saying that they would not actually do anything. They were just there (Iktinou street frequenter, male high-school student aged 20, personal interview, March 2017).

The local press first reported on Iktinou in 2009, regarding complaints by residents and the school parents' association against the expansion of outdoor sitting facilities of the cafés. Since 2015, their interest turned on the 'problem' of young people reveling. They portrayed the street ominously and described it as an "asylum" (Karavasili 2016:17) and a "ghetto" (Thefestival team 2015) to indicate the reluctance of the police and the municipality to intervene. Drug use and fights are foregrounded in their reports of the "wild nights of Iktinou" (Gerakaritou and Papanastasoulis 2015). The state of emergency projected by shop owners, residents and the local press stood in stark contrast with the image of fun, coziness and safety that was depicted by the young interviewees.



The police increased their presence in response to pressure from residents, shop owners and the local press. However, one of the bar owners (male, aged 50, personal interview, April 2017) remarked that they were also checking cafés' compliance to regulations regarding outdoor sitting. One evening in May 2015, after midnight, there was a big police operation involving squads of about 100 policemen. They surrounded the area and asked for ID documents from those hanging out. Around 40 of them, who were not able to present an ID, were taken to the police station for identification. None was detained. The General Police Directorate promised to position two to three squads during all weekends and perform regular patrols to ensure safety and order in the area.

The municipality originally responded by intensifying cleaning operations, and later street lighting. They also approved the extension of pavement sitting at the upper part of Iktinou. However, as the then deputy mayor for construction, environment and cleaning remarked, the problem “cannot be solved with small interventions” (Karavasili 2016:17). He announced that the “total reconstruction” of the two streets was the Municipality's first priority for 2017, in order to “repair the functional and aesthetic disharmonies” (Municipality of Thessaloniki 2017: 15). The scheme's priorities, as published, were purely technical and focused only on the visual and acoustic protection of the school complex, and on securing unobstructed access of emergency vehicles (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, the deputy mayor later admitted that

it is a project, that was not part of the Municipality's immediate priorities but was imposed as there were many offenders in the area [...] They had turned the area around the schools to a beer bar. There were protests on a daily basis [...] So we are intervening in an area that was a refuge of delinquency.

*(Gerakaritou 2018)*

The design scheme was implemented during autumn 2018. Both streets were totally reconstructed. Ledges and benches were removed and were not replaced. The new design did not provide any urban furniture for sitting and released more space for cafés and restaurants to expand their outdoor facilities (see Figures 4.3 and 4.4). ‘Total reconstruction’ introduced defensive design measures as instruments of biopolitics to control bodies and re-impose social order (Gandy 2006) under the guise of technical requirements. More space was secured for ‘normal’ users of public space.

### **‘Publicness’ Reassembled**

In Thessaloniki, a narrow conception of ‘publicness’ was produced, not exclusively by the municipality or by private managers of public space, but by multiple actors, imposing different forms of control and power and prioritizing a particular use of public space while actively restricting other uses. This narrow ‘publicness’ was tolerant to illegal private expansion of pavement cafés on public



**FIGURE 4.3** Iktinou street, before reconstruction: there were benches and ledges that were used by the young groups for sitting.

*Source:* Evangelia Athanassiou, 2017.



**FIGURE 4.4** Iktinou street, after reconstruction: no benches and no ledges that can be used for sitting.

*Source:* Evangelia Athanassiou, 2019.

space, showcasing the city as a tourist attraction with vibrant street life and coffee culture. It was, however, intolerant of the spontaneous expressions of the young and their 'youth habitus' that antagonized the function of the street cafés.

Iktinou used to be a settled space of consumption and leisure, an attractive image of 'cappuccino urbanism' (Zukin 1995). Since 2013, a mixture of local and migrant

young bodies followed an originally politicized group, appropriated the space left over by consumerism and claimed their right to use public space. Amid the fallout of the economic crisis, the youth appropriated the streets and collectively enacted an alternative, unplanned and non-commodified use of central public space. It was, however, noisy, dirty and unruly—and eventually attracted illegal activities—consequently incongruous with the dominant paradigm of ‘clean and safe’ public space. The press, shop owners, residents and the municipality depicted a dark image of delinquency and drug dealing, villifying the presence of the young and foregrounded hygiene, safety and order as pressing demands. The fences and ledges became a contested space in which different paradigms of public space clashed.

The appropriation of the two streets by young people was not related either to a collectivization of the users or to a common ideology, beyond the initial politicized group. The young, in ‘big numbers’, only through the ‘art of [their] presence’ (Bayat 2010) and not through organized political action, as a ‘nonmovement’, appropriated public space, visualized their youthfulness and performed alternative uses. Young bodies using public space questioned the dominant paradigm of depoliticized, ‘clean and safe’ public space, brought about conflict and unsettled the consensual, hegemonic conceptualization of ‘publicness’ that prioritizes consumption and leisure by excluding ‘undesirable’ users. Eventually, this ‘publicness’ was systematically reassembled in Iktinou by the concerted action of many agents acting in consensus. Increased lighting, policing and ID control were used as initial means to evict the ‘undesirable’. Finally, a new spatial arrangement, a defensive design, physically deterred young bodies from frequenting the street and unleashed more space for consumption and leisure.

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