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## Chapter 18

### Postmodern Greek tragedy: Walking in the steps of Thucydides in Athens

Dr Daniel Briggs

*Some legislators only wish to vengeance against a particular enemy. Others only look out for themselves. They devote very little time on the consideration of any public issue. They think that no harm will come from their neglect. They act as if it is always the business of somebody else to look after this or that. When this selfish notion is entertained by all, the commonwealth slowly begins to decay. (Thucydides)*

#### Introduction

What Thucydides describes here seems very fitting to the precarious social and economic climate of contemporary Greece. Public and private debt cannot realistically be repaid in full and the effect of possible 'disorderly default' would exacerbate a European and worldwide financial system in chaos with slow and uncertain outcomes. However, neither the European Union (EU) nor global processes are the sole culprit of Greece's current financial instability. After 30 years of democratic governments, both corruption and financial mismanagement have led to a never-ending austerity horizon, rising unemployment, and episodes of violence and social unrest; the impact of which have been aggravated by police treatment of the public at protests but also the militaristic policing of particular social groups. Unlike the riots in England in 2011, the episodes of public disorder and violence across Athens and other Greek cities has been more politically focussed. Compared with London, for example, the looting and targeting of retail establishments in Athens has been minimal, and instead anger, frustration and violence predominantly seems to be symbolically directed at State institutions – in particular the Constitution building in *Syntagma Square*.

In this chapter, I would like to contextualise these events by reverting to the Classical period in Ancient Greek history: a time when democratic and social progress in Athens and Greece were perhaps at their zenith. Though not perfect, the Classical period was a time of investment in public works, political and social reform and rights, and employment. I briefly chart how Greece arrived at this 'golden age', by describing the emergence of democracy, philosophy and theatre. I show that one forum through which politics and philosophy circulated was Greek tragedy, and it was through this arena the everyday public engaged with narratives of politics, conflict and social life. In contemporary Greece, however, corrupt politics have exposed the country's current socio-economic position. In fact, politics, and any effort to usurp the government, seem to have been far removed from public ownership. Using the theoretical framework of 'performative violence', I suggest that the social unrest and violence in places like *Syntagma Square* in Athens, in effect become the stage in which the players of this real life Greek tragedy act out their respective roles and the audience observe this all through the lens of the media. I present this as though Thucydides, the doyen of ancient Greek political historians who reported politics and conflict during the Classical era of Athens, was there observing events, 'as they happened' when I was witness to social disorder in Athens in June 2011.

## The journey to democracy in Ancient Greece

Ancient Greece is considered to be the 'birthplace' of Western democracy, and although various organised civilisations flourished from 3000 to 1200 BC<sup>1</sup>, it wasn't until around 600 BC that signs of democracy start to flourish. Democracy gained its first step in 594 BC when Solon, an Athenian aristocrat, was given complete authority to rule the city state of Athens. Solon ended the practice of enslaving debtors, and decreed that all debts be written off. He also divided citizens into classes by wealth, defining the rights and duties of each class, limited the amount of land that individuals could own and made laws ensuring locally elected magistrates held office for only one year. He reformed the unjust and arbitrary laws of his predecessor, Draco, and codified the law, achieving a stable government and social cohesion. Sadly, when he retired to travel, civil war broke out. However, democracy took another step forward when Cleisthenes, another Athenian statesman, proposed a constitution be drawn up in Athens. In 508 BC, he dismantled power from the nobility, instead extending voting rights in the assembly to all free adult men and established a council of 500 members, which was open to any adult male citizen. His reforms thus gave many more citizens a chance to serve in the government. However, this early democracy was not perfect as many poor citizens, all women and slaves were excluded from political participation.

Greece then entered a phase of political and philosophical development interspersed with war and autocratic rule, known as the Classical Period (from 500 BC to 323 BC), achieving its greatest political and cultural heights with the full development of the democratic system of government under the Athenian statesman, Pericles. As well as being in charge of the military during the Peloponnesian Wars with Sparta, Pericles was industrious and worked hard to improve Athens for its people. For example, some of the laws he passed allowed the poor to attend theatrical performances for free and jury service became a paid duty. He also used money from the treasury to fund the reconstruction of Athens in 448 BC, which saw the rebuilding of the Acropolis and its centerpiece, the Parthenon. Indeed, throughout the 430s, public works and prosperity continued under Pericles which not only displayed the city's beauty and power but also gave work to Athenians. The Classical period was therefore one of prosperity and new democracy; where public life flourished around mythology, philosophy and theatre.

## The politics of Greek tragedy

Greeks living in this Classical era benefitted from a range of public theatrical performances. They included the tragedies of Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides, as well as the comedies of Aristophanes; with both genres structured around themes concerning the gods, mythology and politics (Sullivan, 1998; Cotterell, 2000; Kershaw, 2006). Aristophanes, in particular, was renowned for his political satires highlighting some of the troubles in Athens during the Classical period, in particular during the Peloponnesian War. His second surviving play, *The Knights* (424 BC), was directed at the Athenian statesman Cleon; his tyrannical leadership but also for his alcoholic tendencies. While Athenian leaders tended to endorse triumphal accounts of the city's military history and army courage and avoiding mention of war's human costs, three of Aristophanes' tragedies advocated peace. Other writers such as Euripides also made anti-war references. In *Trojan*

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<sup>1</sup> Such as Minoan and Mycenaean civilisations.

*Women*, which focussed on the aftermath of the Trojan War, Euripides emphasised the suffering of the defeated and the war crimes of the victors (Pritchard, 2010). Tragedy was therefore a resource for the ancient Greek public to engage in current ethical and political dilemmas (Euben, 2007). Democracy and tragedy were therefore intrinsically linked during the time of the Athenian city-state – in a form of symbiosis. However, the often contradictory plots that formed the basis for tragedies remind us — as they did the Greeks — that no social order is ever free from contradiction; that democracy is not about complete control but about recognising political limitations and dealing with the forces of chaos and change (Chou and Bleiker, 2009). Such forces certainly seem to be evident in contemporary Greece.

### **Contemporary Greece**

In recent years, Greece has witnessed immense social, political and economic instability which have resulted in significant expenditure cuts and austerity measures, growing unemployment and episodes of social unrest and violent rioting. The overt nature of public violence represents anger towards government and state institutions; a level of public dissatisfaction with public administration, corruption, mistreatment by militaristic law enforcement and unsuccessful governance which has, for many years, lacked an effective means of expression due to Greece's weak civil society (Hugh-Jones et al, 2009). The context for 'change' reflects a failure of civil government despite recent shifts towards a 'democratic' society. Let us briefly consider these areas in a bit more detail.

Greece experienced difficulty making transition from exclusivist parliamentarism regime (pre 1974) to democratic government (Pridham, 1990); predominantly because the old tradition countered the democratisation of politics (Mouzelis 1979; Samatas, 1986). Over the last 20 years, disillusionment with political parties has increased and many Greeks, particularly the younger generation, consider their political system as elitist, corrupt and inflexible, operating for its own survival instead of the country's interests (Karamichas, 2009). There is substantial anger and frustration over the economic state of the country. When Greece joined the Euro in 2001, the government completely disguised its financial position in order to qualify for Eurozone membership. Furthermore, the 'Olympic legacy' post 2004 failed to improve transport and housing (Matasaganis, 2011). In the same year, the authorities conceded they lied about the financial position to qualify for the Euro. Although there was some economic recovery, the global financial crash of 2007/8 led to a re-consideration of the true strength and value of public and private assets versus public liabilities, and Greece became exposed.

In October 2009, a new government announced that earlier fiscal data had been misreported, and financial deficits and public debt estimates were radically revised (Monastitiriotis, 2011). At the end of 2009, national debt reached 262 billion Euros and Greece was advised by EU partner countries and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to cut public sector pay and raise taxes (Featherstone, 2011). In May 2010, the government negotiated an unprecedented €110 billion rescue package with the EU, the European Central Bank (ECB) and the IMF, committing the Greek government to sweeping spending cuts and revenue increases (IMF 2010). At the same time, a second round of austerity measures was also announced (Matasaganis, 2011). Under the terms of the measures, public sector pay and pension benefits were cut which increased inequality and sharpened the experience of poverty (Matasaganis, and Leventi, 2011). This created wider public dissatisfaction with the governing party, especially so when Prime Minister Papandreou's indecision was seen to

block progress for a bailout resolution. At the time of writing this chapter in March 2012, Greece was 350 billion Euros in debt and had just agreed another billion-Euro bailout.

These issues have led to public sector strikes and protests but there have been further triggers for recent outbreaks of violence. One significant trigger was the killing of 15-year-old Alexandros Grigoropoulos by the police in December 2008. Alexandros' death resulted in a series of demonstrations, which swiftly turned to violent riots in Athens but also broke out in many Greek cities. But mistrust in the Greek police force runs deep (Mouzelis, 1979; Hugh-Jones et al., 2009), and this has also been consistently reinforced by the police's inability to provide good services, and because they are seen as the shield of the two established major political parties. Spells of unrest have also evolved on the anniversaries of Alexandros' death, in December 2009 and December 2011 respectively. These spells of social unrest were also fuelled by feelings of outrage toward political mistreatment of protestors, unwelcome social reform, economic stagnation and government corruption. One way of capturing such anti-State feeling, public hostility and disorder is through the theoretical perspective of performative violence.

### **Performative violence**

Performative violence is a form of meaningful interaction through which social agents construct reality based on available cultural templates (Juris, 2005). It is 'performative' in the sense that it is symbolically expressive because it seeks to communicate and dramatise important messages and ideas through violence (Riches, 1986). This theoretical framework discounts violence as 'pathological' or 'senseless' but rather as a changing form of communicative interaction which has developed throughout history as a cultural form of meaningful action (Blok, 2000). Such a perspective has been used by other commentators in the context of political activism through social protest and disorder (Juris, 2005, 2008; Rhodes, 2001). These performances are also often captured by news media which acts as a lens through which the acts gain further meaning and receive additional discursive analysis (Bauman and Briggs, 1990; Juris, 2005). And although there is the risk for manipulation and distortion, the media, who desperately seek out such sensational stories, images and clips, happily oblige because symbolic images of burning cars and protestor/police clashes often immediately attract national and international networks (Juris, 2008). It is thus the purposive and symbolic nature of violence in Athens and other Greek cities which seems to relate closely to this theoretical framework. It was at one such episode of summer rioting and violence that these performances were played out, when I walked around parts of Athens, documenting 'what happened' in a similar fashion to the historian, Thucydides.

### **Walking in the steps of Thucydides in Athens**

Thucydides was an Athenian aristocrat born around 460 BC and lived at the height of the Classical period. A Greek historian, he was mostly renowned for his first-hand observations and documentation of the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta in the 5th Century BC. Some say his gritty accounts represent early forms of 'political realism' (Donnelly, 2000), and although some disagree (Betts, 2007), it is difficult to ignore his ability to document 'what happens'. He interviewed both Athenians and Spartans, researched records, and provided eye-witness accounts on events:

*And with regard to my factual reporting of the events of the war I have made it a principle not to write down the first story that came my way, and not even to be guided by my own general impressions; either I was present myself at the events which I have described or else I heard of them from eye-witnesses whose reports I have checked with as much thoroughness as possible.<sup>2</sup>*

I tried to adopt a similar approach in the two days I was in Athens at the height of violent protests against government austerity measures in June 2011.

#### *From Monastiraki to Mitropoleos*

In June 2011, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office had issued statements indicating that there were no restrictions on travel to the Greek capital or any part of the country but warned that visitors should avoid the 'student protests' in *Syntagma Square*<sup>3</sup>. However, this area in Athens was difficult for me to avoid since the conference for which I was attending was very close to the square. To save money, I booked a cheap hotel in the centre of the *Plaka* district – located in the centre of Athens among a labyrinth of small streets and alleyways. *Plaka* sits under the watchful eye of the Acropolis, and is the ancient district that Thucydides would have known as 'Agora'. These days thousands of tourists amble up and down these streets, purchasing modern memorabilia of Greek history, ranging from mini statues of Caryatids<sup>4</sup> to tragic comedy masks.

The first thing one sees, walking out of *Monastiraki* metro, is the Acropolis – the pride of Classical Athens and living proof of the age of Pericles and early democracy. It was late afternoon when I stepped out from station on to a busy street, only to breath in a deluge of lorry fumes. The pavements overflowed with a mixture of busy locals and loitering tourists looking at maps then pointing around. I strode to my right, wheeling my travel bag behind me and lifting it over oil-stained puddles and large potholes. As I crossed, I glanced back on boarded-up and dilapidated shops near to the station. Abandoned carts which would normally sell dried nuts or sesame bread rolls lay broken by the roadside. This was not the *Plaka* I had come to know over the last twelve years.

As I left the main road and walked into a pedestrian area, I tripped over several bricks which stuck out from the ground. Piles of uncollected rubbish bags stacked the roadside and the street demographic became one of scattered young Athenians, small tourist groups, local homeless people, and stray dogs. Ten years ago it would have been difficult to move in these small streets because of the summer tourist invasion and the overflowing popularity of the shops. Now, the only active business seemed to be semi-thriving tourist shops and restaurants; the shop owners standing solemnly outside either smoking cigarettes and discarding them in the drains or looking bored of the pick-up-then-put-back interest most tourists showed in their goods.

Even in this tourist zone, there were signs of social unease; the police patrolling this pedestrian area on large, technologically-adorned Honda bikes, stopping only to make assessments of potential

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<sup>2</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Book 1:1, 20, 21, 22.

<sup>3</sup> Syntagma in Greek means 'Constitution' and this particular square is home to the parliament building.

<sup>4</sup> These are sculpted female figures from the Temple of Athena Nike on the Acropolis.

troublemakers. In the small local cafes, a few customers stared at the TV screen which showed revolving images of the social unrest. After only about 50m or so, I passed a group of local young men smoking what smelt like cannabis; they were dressed in jeans, trainers and one had a t-shirt of Ché Guevara. Their group presence seemed to attract the attention from one of the mobile police officers and there were tense visual exchanges while the policeman sat there on his bike for several minutes, without moving his head while he spoke into his radio.

I turned right in to a small, dirty alleyway where I had booked my hotel. In the street, behind their sunglasses, the locals drank strong Greek coffee and smoked cigarettes. With each step I looked up as the Acropolis towered over me. As I entered the hotel, I saw a few designer shops standing vacant opposite, but I was quickly reminded of where I was by the air-conditioning back-draft. As I checked in, I was told of the glorious tourist sites available to me and it felt like I was being pushed into a tourist bubble. The hotel's main attribute in this respect was a roof terrace which overlooked views of Athens and the Aegean Sea. As the assistant gave me the check-in forms, he slipped out of polite-hotel mode and side stepped to look beyond me at the flat-screen TV, assuming some sort of concerned look. I finished my forms earlier than he expected and turned to look at what he was immersed in. He was looking up at the local news channel showing events from the previous night's violence in *Syntagma Square*, just round the corner. He took my check-in form, reassumed his customer service role, and gave me my key saying 'have a nice stay'.

When I got to my room, I couldn't help but switch on the news; after all, the unrest had been unfolding just up the road from my hotel. I flicked through BBC News, MTV, ABC and CNN (American), RTE (Italian) and TVE (Spain) and eventually found ERT - the Greek news channel. The violent images were relentless, and although I couldn't make much sense of the language, I was drawn to the graphic pictures of the protestor surges on the parliament building in *Syntagma Square* and the violent responses from the police. In one shot, a reporter proudly stood within feet of periodic rushes by the crowd on the Constitutional building in *Syntagma*. I realised that I'd probably have to pass this somehow when I attended my conference the following day because it was located beyond *Syntagma Square*, on the corner of *Orimou* and *Solonos*. I unpacked, and found my way to the hotel roof balcony for a Greek salad and a couple of Mythos beers. The seats and chairs on the hotel roof were placed so tourists could gain the best vantage point of either the Acropolis or the sunset over the Aegean. Most of the tourists with me had claimed the most aesthetic viewpoints while I sat at the back of the rooftop space. Between my reveries at the glowing Acropolis as dusk set in, I heard distant noises. While the tourists remained mesmerised by the history in front of them, I was increasingly drawn to the history unfolding behind them - likely to be another night of rioting in *Syntagma*.

*From Ermou to Orimou (and then to a deserted Acropolis)*

The next morning, I got up early to watch the news on ETR, which reported another night of violence in *Syntagma*. I was curious about what the aftermath looked like. It was around 8.30am when I walked out of the hotel; a street sweeper was taking his wide-reaching broom between the public seating on which numerous homeless men were lying. Between them all, stray dogs wove in and out, searching for discarded food in the streets. Walking past *Mitropoleos*, I continued past an Orthodox church to *Ermou* – a street which leads to *Syntagma*. *Ermou* is a boutique shopping street

but a good proportion of the shops I walked past were empty; some of which littered with naked plastic dummies posing lifeless behind the windows.

When I arrived at the end of *Ermou*, I was confronted with *Syntagma Square* on which stood the Constitution building. It could have been any normal workday in any urban European capital city. The few roads which were open were busy but the clean-up from last night's events had begun on those which were closed. I stopped to absorb this as people walked busily past me with their sunglasses on. I called in to a local café to pick up a take-away frappe and crossed the road into the square. As I walked on to the paved marble slabs, either side of the trees were permanent protestor camps. Some were two-man tents while others seemed to be improvised constructions made up of materials draped between lampposts and public seats. Some tents were tattooed with text and drawings. Hanging above the camps were banners, mostly in Greek but the few in English proclaimed '*we want democracy*' and '*no more lies*'. There was a subdued feeling but a few people had emerged from their camp. I drifted over to talk to one man who must have been in his mid 20s. In his broken English, he told me he had been staying with a friend who was camping there. He had been unemployed for nearly two years and had vowed to stay in *Syntagma* until he saw change. He was critical of the '*corrupt government*' he said and angry at the police. '*This city founded democracy, what do you call it now?*' he added. Shrugging his shoulders, he disappeared to receive a phone call and light another cigarette.

I hurried away as I was already late for my conference. My paper on the risk behaviours of young British people on holiday seemed to be received well and, between the sessions, I talked with the conference organisers who had lived in Athens all their lives. Aside from bemoaning how speakers had cancelled because of the political instability, they too expressed outrage at the police treatment of Greeks in the process of protesting: '*They treat us like they do the dogs*' Georgios, the conference convenor told me, adding '*the people will never get democracy unless it changes*'. I was eager to get back to *Syntagma* and decided to skip the afternoon sessions. When I returned to *Syntagma*, five hours had passed and there was a murmuring hubbub about the place. A few helicopters circulated above and the TV cameras had set up. Small groups of people lined either side of the main pathway through the square where I had talked earlier with the young man. Not only students but men and women of all ages dressed in everyday clothing – they looked to be Athenian people, not the 'students' of which the Foreign Office had warned. As I passed through the square, I stepped over bulky camera wires and tried to overhear conversations. Although disadvantaged with my limited Greek vocabulary, I got talking to a couple of local women who had made banners in Greek. They told me it said '*Papandreou step down*'. When they spoke of their anger of their country's economic and social demise, it was directed at the government and the police. Each time they said politicians' names or described particular events, they started pointing at the Constitution building as if was the origin of all sin.

It was mid-afternoon when I left *Syntagma Square*, vowing to myself to return in the evening. I left because I was eager to walk up to the Acropolis before leaving for the UK in the morning. I returned to the hotel to change from academic attire to tourist outfit. I left the hotel again late in the afternoon and, once again, was again among my tourist contemporaries in *plaka*: swathes of American and Japanese tourist groups perusing the gift shops. They picked and fiddled while most of the shop owners I passed smoked cigarettes or/and watched TV news channels which were reporting on, what looked to be, the previous night's violence. I walked down *Kalamiotou*, turning



right at *Adrianou* and then left on *Panos*, and followed what becomes a marble pathway lined with pine trees. As I ascended, the sight of the white-crested buildings scattered across Attica came into view. However, more tourists seemed to be descending than ascending – and I found out why as I approached the main entrance. There was a large sign at the ticket office stating that the Acropolis was closed because of public strikes against government austerity cuts. As tourists approached, they tut-tutted, shaking their heads as if to suggest they were unsympathetic to the real reasons for the strike. Instead I climbed to *Choris Ornoma*, a vantage point opposite the Acropolis which offers a decent view of the structure. By the time I returned to my hotel, it was early evening. I was ready to return to *Syntagma*.

### *The stronghold of Syntagma*

By now, I was completely captivated by what was going on. I had come to know about the riots in Athens in 2008, stemming from the police killing of a teenager and had learned of the country's economic problems which had since deteriorated, but to be among potential unrest felt almost unreal, perhaps mythical. It was about 7pm as once again I walked up *Ermou*. Loudspeakers boomed out and a crowd-like drone hit my senses as I walked swiftly to *Syntagma*. As I walked, a few others overtook me while preparing to tie handkerchiefs over their face. When I arrived at the foot of the square, people were scattered intermittently around the streets and the square. It was a difficult sight to absorb. There must have been about 800-900 people (the main group) near the main Constitution building which was guarded by the police while several hundred others scattered around in small groups or as individuals. Most were men and had their face covered. For some reason, some were half naked. There was no visible main group near me and the roads were completely littered with rubbish, broken bottles and paper. People stood on public seats, bus shelters, and hung half way up lamp-posts, chanting and shouting at the Constitution building. I was one of the few people there who had their face uncovered and felt pretty vulnerable. It struck me as almost impossible to establish conversations in these moments, even though I was used to undertaking very tense research in conflict situations. Instead I remained and watched from the corner of the street. As a neutral, I couldn't work out whether it was better to be by oneself or with a group, whether to stand still or be mobile, or how to act should trouble come my way.

Then a protest march appeared from my left from a road running parallel to *Ermou* – and emptied into *Syntagma*. It was led by hooded protestors with large banners, some of whom held sticks and broken-building debris. They were all chanting. This march was about 100 strong. However, they were cautiously pursued behind by the police as they marched into the square. They turned around to face the police who were following in pursuit.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the square, near to the Constitution building, the crowds made explosive surges towards the police who stood defensively, fending off the protestors with large swipes of their batons. The banners bobbed up and down between the many Greek national flags which were being waved by the protestors. Drums were beating and new chants emerged. While people walked in and out of the main group near the Constitution building, tear gas was fired about 150m to the right of me and I retreated 20m back to the edge of *Ermou*. I didn't even know where the tear gas came from but it seemed strange it was fired at the patchy gatherings while the masses continued to surge against the Constitution building. As the tear gas arrived, most of the small crowd to my right showed their ingenuity and put on gas masks.

Then, to my left, I saw more police with batons and riot uniform engage in another attempt to enter into the lower half of the square the parallel road. They walked like a human wall, ten wide and 15 or 20 so long, single file behind each other. The crowd threw stones, bricks, whatever they could find at them while the stray dogs aimlessly jogged around, somehow keeping out of the line of fire. There seemed to be no clear pattern to the rioters' attacks; only that they were in response to the tear gas. Even then, most protestors were ready, either having their own homemade face protection or gas masks. The protesters then cleverly contrived to push back the police marching from the parallel road by instigating their own form of riot shield, by sliding large plant boxes forward, and intermittently hiding behind them as they lobbed various makeshift bombs in the general direction of the police.

After they had succeeded in blocking further police entry to the square from the parallel road, they then retreated having set their roadblock and dispersed somewhat. After five minutes, they started to re-form as a group. Word seemed to have got round that the police were attempting to re-enter the square from the parallel road. They stood inactive, waiting for the police to make the next move but the police held back. With no sign of police advance, the crowd, which had gathered behind their improvised roadblock, again started to dissipate. A few young-looking men cycled around while another couple circulated on mopeds. It looked like the police had retreated until a huge wave of tear gas was launched from the parallel road which shifted the remaining protesters from the area. As I remained stood at the top corner of *Ermou*, a few resolute protestors lingered there, seemingly invincible in their gas masks and handkerchiefs. They stood with their arms outstretched, inviting some sort of police response. They continued to look directly at the police, aggressively gesticulating and thrusting their arms in the air and shouting as if they would die for their cause. Then a few retreated to where I was standing and looked on at the Constitution building.

The main crowd at the Constitution building then launched petrol bombs at the parliament grounds which had been resolutely guarded by the police. Feeling a little more confident, I moved forward between people loitering and running around to get a closer look. As I moved closer, the jeering and booing of the crowd became more formidable. The petrol bombs were replaced by bricks. I moved closer out of curiosity to within about 100 metres of the Constitution building and saw the main group retreat as tear gas was fired into them. The police then moved their barricades and fortified their line in front of the Constitution building. There were visible violent exchanges as the crowd surged in small groups; some individuals breaking off to make their own independent attacks only to receive personal repercussions when the police rushed back at them, applying swipes to their legs with long batons. Bells started to ring as another group managed to penetrate the police line and started shaking another police barricade, which divided the square from the Constitution building. Suddenly, a batch of tear gas was fired on them and they also retreated. To my right, about 50m away, there was a commotion between protestors and some started to beat each other with sticks and throw rocks at each other. This fight started to move my way and this was when I decided I had seen enough. I swiftly backed down *Ermou* and to the relative safety of my hotel room.

## **Discussion**

This chapter captures the experience of contemporary Greek socio-economic problems against a historical consideration of the 'democratisation' of Ancient Greece and through the observational style of Thucydides who was one of the first to make use of a political realism (observation,

documentation of eye witness accounts) to understand politics and social life in the context of conflict (Peloponnesian war). Through these observations, the chapter shows that a form of performative violence liberates the Greek peoples' discontent, and the violence and unrest which ensues, in my view, embodies a Postmodern Greek tragedy which was played out on the stage of *Syntagma Square*. I concede to my tourist status and the language barriers but I have come to know Athens and its people reasonably well, having visited the city almost every year for the last twelve years. It seems clear to me that what I witnessed in Athens, and what has been written about these violent outbursts across Greek cities (Matasaganis, and Leventi, 2011; Monastitiriotis, 2011), seems far more politically focused than the unrest that took place in England weeks later in August 2011 because the public anger was primarily directed at the State institutions and faltering democracy.

Indeed, despite steps towards democracy in contemporary Greece, the recent Greek politic ideology is one of lies and deceit of its people (Alivizatos 1990; Mouzelis 1979; Samatas, 1986). The assurances of fiscal stability when Greece entered the Euro, embellished by the elite's promise of glory in the 2004 Olympic Games, post-Olympic economic prosperity and resulting growth. However, 'stories' that 'Greece is 'stable', it could 'enter the Euro' and 'didn't need financial support' despite the billion Euros deficit, masked the realities of a floundering national economic system which had misled the EU when joining the Euro and accusations of government corruption have also not helped (Karamichas, 2009; Matasaganis, 2011; Monastitiriotis, 2011). The Greek public were asked to foot the bill for the blunders of the powerful who continued to retain positions of power (Matasaganis, and Leventi, 2011) under police protection (Mouzelis, 1979; Hugh-Jones et al., 2009).

The way in which public action against Greece's economic decline and public treatment by the authorities (Karamichas, 2009) took form seems to be through a form of performative violence (Juris, 2005, 2008; Rhodes, 2001). This theoretical lens is useful because it treats violence as a method of communication and dramatisation to convey particular messages (Riches, 1986). The violence and disorder in Athens and across Greek cities had meaning, a political significance which, Juris (2005: 427) argues, counters any question of its senselessness in the context of such political protests:

*Performative violence is neither random nor senseless, but rather responds to a specific economy of signification. The resulting mass media images helped bring a great deal of public visibility to anti-corporate globalization movements, and even to many of their political demands.*

As Greek political representation decreased and public anger and frustration increased (Hugh-Jones et al, 2009), the forum by which public expression was manifested was through a form of Greek tragedy. In Ancient Greece, the public performance of tragedies created by poets and playwrights was one means by which the public were able to engage in ethical and political dilemmas (Euben, 2007). One parallel to make with contemporary Greece is that of the theatre itself. From what I observed, the stage for the contemporary social unrest and violence was *Syntagma Square* and the set was the backdrop of the Constitution building. Secondly, the 'rioters' and police became the players of the tragedy, acting out the issues of concern; the 'rioters' protesting and fighting in opposition to oppressive governance (Karamichas, 2009; Pritchard, 2010) and the police on behalf of the higher powers who seek to maintain power and advantage (Mouzelis, 1979; Hugh-Jones et al., 2009). Thirdly, the media became the eye by which Greeks in their shops, in hotels, and at home saw

the tragedy and took part as the audience. When walking round Athens, it seemed to me that some of the audience certainly seemed tired of the current political system and its players (Hugh-Jones et al., 2009), and this was evident in some of the testimonies of those with whom I spoke. In this way, the tragedy was played out so that knowledge of the country's suffering could extend beyond the confines of political deliberations in the Constitution building on *Syntagma Square* (Euben, 2007) – a key dictum of performative violence – so that the message attracts discussion (Bauman and Briggs, 1990; Juris, 2005) and the national and international news networks (Juris, 2008).

Steps toward political change and economic stability in contemporary Greece (Chou and Bleiker, 2009) are undoubtedly thwarted by fragile public trust in the competence of political institutions. Indeed, these spells of social unrest have been for some years now ever present in places like *Syntagma* and evidence of increasing austerity was everywhere I looked (Matasaganis, and Leventi, 2011), even within the tourist showpiece of *Plaka* and around the symbolic glory of the Acropolis. To me, it seems difficult to ignore the social advances of the Classical period when Greeks still refer to ancient splendour of Greece and its democratic roots, evident in the words of one protestor with whom I spoke: *'This city founded democracy, what do you call it now?'* Perhaps some lessons could be learnt from the Ancient Greek democratic forefathers; in Classical Greece, Solon wrote off debt, Cleisthenes dismantled political control from the powerful and Pericles invested in public works. Nevertheless, it difficult to see if, how and when Greece will emerge from the political and economic doldrums and, like Thucydides thousands of years ago, we are left asking questions:

*When will there be justice in Athens? There will be justice in Athens when those who are not injured are as outraged as those who are.* (Thucydides)

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