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Culture, Politics and the Urban Crisis: the case of Modern Athens ¹

Visitors of Athens find conditions in the Greek capital worsening every year. The Athenians are not surprised any more by the constant degradation of the environment in which they live. Air pollution, traffic congestion, and more generally difficulty to circulate and function are the major manifestations of urban crisis.

Athens is not the only city in the world to face crisis. A great number of the Third World cities are in a critical situation and many cities of the developed countries have been faced with major difficulties during the last decades.

In the Third World, the urban crisis is the expression of deep economic and social problems. The population of those cities have become urbanized because of the extreme poverty of the countryside. Few of those outcasts of the rural world can find a proper job in the city. The city of the Third World often takes the form of an enormous refugee settlement. It has to feed a non-productive population which has exchanged the misery of the rural environment for that of the urban. The cities of the Third World are thus unable to cope with urban crises essentially because of lack of resources. Their crisis is structural and extremely difficult to solve without coping with the more general problems of economic development.

It is obvious that this description can't be applied to the Greek case. The economy of Athens has been dynamic and the demographic growth of the city during the post-war decades was essentially due to what has been called the 'pull' rather than the 'push' factor.

In the developed countries, urban crises take the form of a need of adaptation to new economic and technological conditions, like the massive use of the private automobile. The fifties and sixties have been dominated, in the American and then in the European cities, by this problem.

Although it can be argued that few cities have really managed to adapt to the invasion of the automobile, considerable progress has been made. Sometimes drastic measures have been taken, not without some sacrifice of the quality of the urban environment. Highways have thus been constructed during the fifties and the sixties, cutting through the downtown of many American cities, to

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facilitate traffic. In other cases, a more subtle policy has been applied, combining artery construction with the development of public transport systems, the 'pedestrianization' of large parts of the center of the city, etc.

The crisis of Athens can be considered as belonging to this later category. What however differentiates the case of Athens is the failure to respond to the challenge of change. Inertia, combined with physical and other conditions, has led to a kind of chain reaction, as we shall see further on. The reasons of this kind of inertia are therefore important to understand. Since the economic factor, although important, is not the dominant one, as is in the cities of the Third World, we should concentrate our attention to other factors. The study of the history of Modern Athens and of its role in the Greek space and the analysis of the process and the mechanisms of the crisis show us the importance of such other factors as the political and the cultural in the production and reproduction of the Athens urban crisis.

Athens and nation-building

Sixty years ago, in a book named Geography and World Power, James Fairgrieve wrote in respect to Greece: "A popular misconception must be avoided. If we look at a modern political map, and then think of Greece as only the southwestern extremity of the Balkan peninsula, where the mountain ridges are beginning to break down to the sea, we are correct in the sense that this is the modern kingdom of Greece. We are wrong if we think of this land as the only home even of modern Greeks, and we are still further wrong if we think of this as the Greece ..."²

This misconception has not disappeared in our times. Although the exchange of populations that followed the defeat of the Greek army in Asia Minor in 1922 diminished dramatically the Greek presence outside the Greek frontiers, the growth of the Greek-American community, the emigration to West Germany and to other countries after the War have created a new Diaspora and the 'Greeks abroad' continue to represent a considerable part of the total Greek population. Thus, even today, the weight of the Greek Diaspora is considerable: at least as much as that of half of the population living in Greek territory. It is therefore necessary to bear in mind the basic division of the Greek space into a national territory and a Diaspora network of communities. The relationship of those two spaces is a dynamic one; according to the economic and political adventures of Greece, population moves from the one to the other.

Athens has been the stronghold of the national territory. This is the reason why we often forget, when treating the evolution of Athens, the space of the Diaspora, and this is a serious negligence, since the influence of the Greeks abroad was and is far from insignificant on the development of Athens. The Greek capital being the major pole in the national territory has formed the bridge

² James Fairgrieve, Geography and World Power, New York, E.P. Dutton and Company, 1917, p.50.

between this space and the other spaces of Hellenism. At the same time, from the mid-nineteenth century until now, Athens has been the symbol of the Modern Greek nation, and in this sense it has always had the eyes of Greeks, in Greece or abroad, turned towards her.

Thus a first misconception is considering the Greek territory as the sole hinterland of Athens. The influence of the Greek capital radiates everywhere where the Greeks are present: in far-away countries, in the Greek Communities, through the ever-changing pattern of the Greek nomads of the sea, the Greek merchant marine.

A second common mistake is considering that the prominent role of the Greek Capital has been acquired from the first moment of the Greek Independence. Athens, it is true, had carried through the ages a valuable heritage. This heritage was however her one and only advantage. During the late Byzantine times and under the Ottoman Empire, Athens had become a secondary city. During the War of Independence, she had been a major battlefield. As a result, her population fled away and most of the houses of the city have been reduced to ruins.

The first Greek Kingdom, with Athens as its capital, represented a very small part of Hellenism. It occupied a territory which was less than the third of today's territory of Greece. That territory was mountainous, with few natural resources, away from the major commercial routes and destroyed by the War of Independence. No important town among those in which the Greek element held a prominent position, like Salonica, Smyrna, or Constantinople, was included in it.

Not only was Athens the capital of an unimportant kingdom, but in addition she was situated on an eccentric, in respect to the Greek territory, position and appeared thus to have little opportunity to play a role in the economic life of the Kingdom of Greece. One may wonder why, under these conditions, has Athens been chosen to become the capital of the new Kingdom. Two sets of reasons can be produced and it is difficult to decide which of the two has been the most important one.

The most obvious category of reasons is related to the ancient glory of Athens. It should not be forgotten that in 1833, at the time of the decision, neo-classicism was the dominant cultural current in Europe, and especially in Bavaria, from where came the new King of Greece. The creation of the Greek state was thought of as the rebirth of Ancient Greece and the heroes of the War of Independence were often compared to those of the Ancient Greek History. It was therefore more than natural to choose a city with as glorious a past as that of Athens to be the capital of Modern Greece.

The second category of reasons is of a more practical nature. A local society existed in the other cities of the Kingdom, characterized by various antagonisms with other cities or regions, and by its own internal strife. The task of the new political power was to create a state over and above those conflicts, otherwise it would risk to have the same fate with the regimes that had preceded it. Athens, completely destroyed by the war, presented the advantage to be a city that would practically be constructed ex nihil "free of the vested sectional interests that might attach to a city whose historic traditions or economic ties

were with one of the components rather than with the country as a whole".³ The primary aim of the new state being expansion to territories of the Ottoman Empire, even the eccentricity of the city was a political advantage. It gave to Athens the character of what has been called by Political Geographers an outward capital, which ... "guards a dangerous frontier, gathering behind it the not yet united components of the state, organizing them into a whole in the face of some external menace to their common culture, perhaps finally taking the offensive..."⁴

Although the choice of Athens as the capital of Greece can be justified, the fact remains that she was in the 1830's a little more than a village. Her population grew rapidly during a few years as the result of the arrival of the King, his Court, the public servants, the military, the representatives of the local elites. However, many of the leading elements in Hellenism were still outside it.

To understand the internal political situation during the first decades of the Greek Independent State, one must look at the territorial organization of the Greeks under the Ottoman Empire, and especially as it had evolved during the eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries.

The Greek presence in the Empire was most obvious in two different environments: the mountains and the islands on the one hand, and the cities on the coast, especially the major ports of the Empire: Salonica, Smyrna, Constantinople, Alexandria. In the mountains and in the islands the Greeks lived almost independently. They had their own political organization through their communities, each one leading its own separate life. The geography helped this organization. The link between the communities and the world was the sea, since the mountainous character of the country and the inability of the Ottoman Power to eradicate robbery made transport by land routes impracticable. On the other hand, the deep penetration of the sea gave access to the world at large to every small natural region. Thus, the spatial organization of the territory occupied by the Greeks can be compared to that of an Archipelago, a set of islands; whether those communities were based on real islands or on land separated by mountains and linked by sea with other territorial units, made no real difference.

This territorial organization did not prepare the Greeks to live under a centralized government which would by necessity try to break the regionalistic structures and create a politically integrated ensemble. The situation was further complicated by the Greeks of the Diaspora, who also represented different political attitudes, according to their place of origin. Conservative bureaucrats having served under the Sultan or the Tzar had to coexist with merchants inspired by the liberal ideas of the French Revolution. The newcomers were persons highly skilled in management and political intrigue and those skills, far from facilitating, complicated even more the task of the government.

³ O.H. Spate, "Factors in the Development of Capital Cities", Geographical Review, Vol. 32 (1942), pp. 622-631, p. 623.

⁴ *ibid*, p. 627.

The social mix was an explosive one and every effort to coordinate its elements towards the creation of a national state had failed until the arrival of King Otto. What made things different with the regime established by the new King was that it was a de facto, though not de jure, foreign occupation. To create a homogenous alloy out of the heterogeneity of the Greek nation, the pressure of 3.500 foreign bayonets has had to exerted, for the new king was accompanied by a mercenary army of 35 hundred soldiers whose task was to repress by force the movements that expressed the old regionalistic political structures and behaviors. The Bavarians were the Deus ex machina, the outside factor that gave a solution to what seemed as an impasse of civil war, and Athens has been selected to be an instrument of the policy of unification.

The first function of Athens has therefore been the political unification of the Kingdom. The regionalism as well as all other centrifugal tendencies have been crushed by the establishment of a highly centralized system of administration emanating from the capital, which abolished every element of local government and made the Greek politics directly dependent from the person of the King. The local elites, by force or by persuasion, accepted the new system and usually retired from their local fiefs to get settled in the capital, near the court, the new and only origin of political power. From there, they would serve as the political middlemen between the Center (Athens) and the Periphery (their regions of origin) and thus a highly hierarchial political system, the system of political patronage, came to be added to the equally hierarchial system of centralized government.

By the mid-nineteenth century, this process had been completed. Athens had become the undisputable political center of the Kingdom of Greece. However, many of the elements of the Greek leadership were still escaping from her influence. In spiritual and cultural matters, her major opponent was Constantinople (Istanbul), the highest object of the Greek irredentist aspirations. Athens was still considered as a provisional Greek capital. However, the two national elites, the old Phanariot elite of Constantinople and the new one which was emerging in Athens under European influence, had different visions of the future. The aim of the first was to put the disintegrating Ottoman Empire under Greek control by slowly replacing the Turks as the leading national group, while for the Athenians the Greek Kingdom should annex as many territories of the Ottoman Empire as possible and arrive thus to Constantinople. The first project can be termed as imperialistic while the second one as nationalistic.

That there was a latent conflict between the two elites can be shown by the fact that one of the first measures of the new Greek regime has been to neutralize the influence of the Phanariots at its strongest point: the Church. In 1833 the Greek Church has been declared autocephalous (independent) with the King, who was a Roman Catholic, at her head. In 1837 Athens underlined its will to become the cultural capital of Hellenism by the establishment of the University, which would soon attract students from all parts of the Greek Oikoumene.

However, until the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the economic leadership of the Greek Nation still remained outside the limits of the country. Inside the territory of the Greek State, the economic space was still extremely

partitioned. Each natural region had its own economy. Some were closed on themselves, their agriculture being of a mixed type that gave to the farmer a sufficient variety of crops to be quasi-independent of the world of exchange, although often living on the very limits of subsistence. In other regions, commercial agriculture had developed, like that of the Corinth raisin. In such regions, the economy was organized through local urban centers which developed commerce with the outside world directly from their own ports and in which a prospering bourgeoisie was emerging.

Outside the limits of the Kingdom, the network of merchant greek communities was witnessing a new period of prosperity, which was due to the efforts of the Ottomans to reform their economy and to the development of trade as part of the advancing European penetration into the Near and Middle East.

In this other Greek economic Archipelago, only one city of the Greek Kingdom participated. Hermoupolis, founded by the refugees of Chios on the island of Syra, had developed in the mid-nineteenth century as a major emporium of the Orient. It was also the center of the wheat importation to Greece and certainly the most important economic center of the Kingdom.

Thus, during the first period of its modern history, Athens became the instrument of political unification of the Kingdom and competed with Constantinople for the cultural leadership of Hellenism. However, it had no economic activity of more than local importance. Its port, Pireaus, had one and only function, the importation of consumption goods for the Athenian clientele. The population of Athens and Pireaus together after the period of rapid growth during the first year rose more slowly to about 50,000 people by 1860 (of which only 6,500 in Pireaus). The population of the Kingdom was at that time about 1,100,000 people and Hermoupolis concentrated about 20,000, a little more than the most prospering city of the plantation economy, Patras.

What had happened with the political space would be repeated, during the last three decades of the nineteenth century, with the economic: Athens was to become the undisputable economic capital of Greece and start to play a leading role in the wider Greek economic space.

This change has been the product of a series of new conditions. The annexation of the Ionian Islands in 1864 and of Thessaly in 1881 considerably increased the economic weight of the Kingdom and contributed in the strengthening of the capital's position. The transformation of the Greek economic space to an Athenian economic hinterland really took place however only after the consequences of the technology of steam-powered engines had been felt in Greece. The small network of railways created during the end of the nineteenth century, linked all productive regions of Greece with the capital. The steamboats, by replacing the sailing boats, gave to navigation a new dimension, checked the progress of Hermoupolis, diminished the importance of the local ports and made the fortune of Pireaus. The construction of the Corinth canal favored even more the growth of Pireaus as a port. Thus, by the end of the nineteenth century, the situation of Athens, from the economic point of view, had been radically changed. It was no more an eccentric one, and the two main means of transport, the railway and the steamboat, created two networks that converged from all parts

of the economically useful Greece towards the capital. The economic space of the Kingdom has been integrated and polarized, just as it had happened half a century ago with the political and administrative space.

At the same time, the Greeks of the Diaspora were finding more and more obstacles in their commercial endeavors, due to the European competition and to the rising nationalism in the Balkans and the Arab lands. For the first time they considered the Greek Kingdom as a possible refuge and many of them started to invest in real estate in Greece and more specifically in Athens.

Thus, at the end of the nineteenth century, all the energies of the Greek nation converged towards Athens. Political center of Greece since the first decades of the Independence, she disputed the cultural leadership of Hellenism to Constantinople, then she unified and polarized the economic space of the Kingdom and finally became a pole of attraction for the Greek merchants and financiers of the Diaspora. Its hinterland, completely integrated by that time, had been recently enlarged, giving to Athens sufficient resources for the needs of a modern national state. Strong with the complete control of the National State and her leadership of the Diaspora, Athens was more than ready to fight for the largest possible share from the products of the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire.

Centralization and the strengthening of Athens are linked thus with the outburst of national energy that characterizes Greece at the beginning of our century. This energy found its outlet during the Balkan and then during the First World War and has not been exhausted but as late as 1922 when the defeat of the Greek Army in Asia Minor marked the limits of the possibilities for Greek territorial expansion. The outcome has been a dramatic extension and growth of the Kingdom of Greece. The territory has been doubled in surface and the population has more than doubled in number.

However, the space of the Diaspora shrank considerably during this same period. From Turkey, from Bulgaria, from Yugoslavia, from Russia and from Egypt the Greeks abandoned their communities either by force or with their own will, in exchange for the safety of the Greek territory. The only important Greek community that remained intact was that of the United States of America, created by the emigration of the late eighteenth and the early twentieth century.

The population of Athens grew rapidly during this period. We had left it at 50,000 in the 1860's. It has been multiplied by six in fifty years, until 1910. This time Pireaus grew more rapidly than Athens, since it was the economic functions, commerce and industry, that attracted the largest part of the new immigrants. The period of the Balkan Wars and the First World War, with the enlargement of the Athens hinterland, added 150,000 people to the population of the capital and thus, from 300,000 the population of Athens and Pireaus rose to 450,000. The arrival of the refugees sent the population to 700,000. Before the Second World War Athens (with Pireaus) was already a millionaire city.

The reasons for the rapid growth of Athens during the first decades of the twentieth century are both demographic and political. The arrival of the refugees was, in a way, an accidental event that took a catastrophic form; it does not enter into any pattern of 'normal' growth. It gave an important impetus

to the growth of Athens because of the composition of the demographic inflow. The refugees were an urban population, physically selected through the adventures that had brought them to mainland Greece, and eager to create their life anew. They are at the origin of the renewal of the whole economic environment, of the creation of the industry of Athens.

The political aspect of the growth of Athens is more complex. Among the new territories, the larger part, Macedonia and Thrace, constituted a regional complex which was distinct from that of southern Greece. The city of Salonica was the traditional capital of this region. One could expect to see her develop a role of a major regional capital and of a pole of attraction for the urban immigrants of northern Greece.

The region of northern Greece was a very sensible space from a geopolitical point of view. By the exchange of population it had become uniformly Greek, but that was not the case in the past, when it was used as the example of a space with extreme ethnic complexity. Under such conditions, as well as under the influence of the traumatism that the struggle for Macedonia had produced, it is not surprising that the development of Salonica, has not been favored by the Athenian power structures. Thus, Salonica did not develop into a real competitor of Athens, who extended her influence to a hinterland that should normally be Salonica's monopoly.

In this way, the end result of this third period is a step further into the strengthening of the position of Athens in the national space. This time it was neither political nor economic polarization of an existing national territory but rather the integration of new territories and population into pre-existing centralized structures that pushed the Athenian growth even further. The population of Athens and Pireaus represented in 1940 about 15% of the population of the country as a whole and in the confines of the two cities the largest part of the national industry, and most of the higher economic functions were concentrated. For the first time a certain uneasiness started to be felt about spatial concentration in Greece.

After the Second World War, the concern about hyperconcentration was forgotten though, in front of the needs of reconstruction and the efforts to produce a take-off of the economy. The development strategy that has been applied, in Greece as elsewhere, led to intensification of urbanization which was strongly oriented toward the big cities. During the fifties, the conurbation of Athens was the only place in the country where condition for the development of industrial production could be found: infrastructure, work-force, financial institutions, access to the Government services. Thus, industrialization has been linked with even greater growth of the capital city. Although those conditions changed with time, and a process of diffusion of economic development started to appear after the mid-sixties, until the mid-seventies the population of Athens continued to grow with a stable rate of more than 3% per year, which means that in the seventies about a hundred thousand persons were added to the capital every year, almost the size of the third city of Greece, Patras, and that between 1971 and 1981 the population of Athens had absorbed as many people as those in Salonica, the second city in the country. With a population of almost three and a half millions in 1981 the conurbation of Athens concentrated the third of the population of Greece and the fifth of

the total Greek population in Greece and abroad.

The growth of Athens to such an extent is, as we have seen, the result of both historical and geographical causes. Athens has been the center of the process of centralization, first political, then cultural and finally economic, that created until the end of the nineteenth century a monolithic national state out of the heterogeneity of the elements that found themselves together after the Greek War of Independence. She has thus concentrated all the important urban functions. When the Greek territory has been doubled, she not only kept but even reinforced her position of preeminence because of historical inertia but also because of the delicate geopolitical situation of the Northern territories. Athens has been the city that profited most of industrialization. Partly by accident before the Second World War, because of the arrival of 250,000 refugees who offered both the working force and the technical skills for industrial development, her industry created its first foundation. After the Second World War the nature of the development strategy was beneficial to the growth of cities with resources like those of Athens: access to the government, cheap working force and a minimum of infrastructure. Finally, the growth of Athens is also due to an often forgotten factor: the fact that it is the interface between the space of the national state and the Greek space abroad.

In fact we can consider Athens as a city with a double hinterland. Greece as a whole constitutes her first hinterland; in it the influence of Athens is only limited by that of Salonica, in northern Greece. The second hinterland is the network of Greek communities abroad as well as the Greek merchant fleet, covering, in a diffuse and discontinuous way, the whole Oikoumene. Although it is very difficult to estimate, and even more to quantify, the influence of this second hinterland to the Athenian growth, it undoubtedly exists, taking various forms and manifestation, from the real estate investments in the Athens region by the American-Greeks to the fleet of shipowner's yachts at the Saronicos Coast.

During a period of a little more than one and a half century since Modern Athens became the capital of Greece, the city has been transformed again and again. Almost all of the Greek history since King Otto took place or has been strongly echoed in the Athenian scene.

During the first years, in the 1830's and the 1840's, Athens can be compared to an American mushroom city. The capital has being erected out of nothing. The French map of Athens of 1850, with all the details that the skill of the French surveyors put into it, gives a fascinating image of the progresses made in two decades.

The Athenian society at that period appears clearly through the description of various visitors, who portray a closely knit community orbiting around the Palace. This community was made of the most heterogenous and exotic elements. The variety of the Greek element - ranging from the former chiefs of Klephts (mountain brigands and heroes of the War of Independence) to the sages of the University of Athens - was further enhanced by the presence of such foreigners as General Church, an Englishman who anticipated Lawrence of Arabia, or the American Reverend King, fighting a lost-in-advance battle to proselytize a population that had managed to keep its faith during four centuries of Ottoman domination. The Royal Couple itself was not less representative of Romanticism, dressed as they were in Greek costumes and hoping to resurrect Byzantium and

Ancient Greece.

Then came the industrial times, with the growth of Pireaus, the construction of the railway which linked the port with Athens, the rise of fashionable resorts, on the coast or at the feet of the surrounding mountains. The life of the city was extending outward, and society started to differentiate into the more serious, industrially-minded, community of Pireaus and the more sophisticated and intellectual society of Athens.

The refugees produced a dramatic change of scenery. Out of the two cities, a conurbation has been formed in a few years. The establishment of 250,000 refugees resulted to the occupation of the spaces that formerly separated the two cities by new settlements. The development of industry led to the first social conflicts and Athens found herself divided between the 'progressive and the reactionary forces of society' and became for a certain time the arena of civil war.

Nostalgia tends to embellish the image of past periods and the actual description of the 'old good times' of the capital by the 'Athenolates' (those adoring Athens) hides the everyday problems of the past, which appear however in the descriptions of some less romantically-minded travellers and even more by the concerns of the community of Athens. The centralization of Government made the local authorities both inefficient and irresponsible. With few exceptions, this has been especially true for Athens, since the local politics of the capital have always had much more to do with the national issues than with the urban problems.

One of the major difficulties has been the provision of the city with water. All through the nineteenth century and until the late 1930's the Athenians have had to cope with deficient supply. In addition, few of the streets were paved, especially in the poorer neighborhoods. As a result, there was a large amount of dust in the atmosphere at summer, which produced a serious problem of eye disorders, to such an extent that the first hospital to be built in Athens was an ophthalmological clinic. During the winter, most of the streets were turned into muddy torrents when it rained.

Those problems were not of a nature noble enough to touch the sentiments of the 'Evergètes', the rich Greeks of the Diaspora who offered to the capital the buildings that housed prestigious institutions like the universities, the hospitals etc. The contrast between those monumental buildings constructed in neo-classical style, and the filth of the streets symbolized the sacrifice of efficient local government to nationalistic centralization.

The establishment of the refugees after 1922 was at the origin of more difficulties. No general master plan has been followed and no public authority made any effort to coordinate the acts of the various services that had the responsibility for finding shelter and jobs for the refugees. The urban growth that ensued was utterly anarchic and created an urban tissue that flowed over all former administrative structures. However, as the explosive growth of Athens made the problem of water supply even more pressing, at last a long term solution has been implemented through the construction of an artificial lake. This, however, is the one and only really important project concerning the capital that had been realized before the Second World War.

A little before the War an administrative structure has been created to cope with the need of overall management. It covered the whole of the conurbation, which has been named 'Region of Management of the Capital' (Periokhi Dioikiseos Protevousis). Constantine Doxiadis was at the head of the planning office of this new Regional Government. The idea to create what we would call today a regional structure, rediscovered in many major metropolitan areas of the developed world two or three decades later, was undoubtedly his own. The War ended this unique experiment too soon.

The situation after the Second World War was one of economic, social and political crisis. Although the cycle that had started with the Athenian consolidation of central power had been completed before the War, the country was facing again internal problems that threatened to divide it. The new conflicts did not concern the choice of a strategy of expansion (as was the case with the Venizelist/Royalist struggle). The internal distribution of political power between blocks with different interests, aspirations and allegiances was now at stake.

The Crisis

Never was Athens as attractive as before the environmental crisis of the seventies and eighties. The sixties have been for the Greek capital a period of efficiency, prosperity and high environmental quality.

The civil war was finished in 1949. The fifties have been years of intense reconstruction. The largest part of Athens has been rebuilt and in the sixties Athens was made up of new, modern buildings. The public transport system had been modernized during the same period. An important road construction program inside and outside the city facilitated traffic and gave access to surrounding areas of rare beauty.

During the sixties, people could easily move inside the city and around it by using public transport. It took a maximum of 30 minutes to get from any part of the densely built areas, concentrating the largest part of the population of Athens, to the center of the city. Many people could simply walk from their homes to their offices.

The center itself was extremely dense. In less than half a square mile, all the Government offices, the major public services, the private offices, the financial institutions, the commerce, practically all of the central functions were packed together. After getting to the center by bus, one could move around and conclude all his jobs by foot.

The ease of access to the facilities of the center contributed to its success. The rise in living standards did not produce, until the end of the sixties, any development of commercial concentrations outside the Athens downtown. The only other important commercial center was that of Pireaus, which however existed from the past, when Pireaus was still a separate city.

The compact character of the Athens downtown and the efficiency of the public transport system facilitated the economic activities and at the same time gave

the possibility to adapt the rhythms of work to the climatic conditions and to the mediterranean habits. One could return home for lunch and siesta and come back to the office to work for two or three extra hours in the evening. Breaking the day into two meant more efficiency and less stress. Dinner and the time after were dedicated to recreation and social contacts.

During the summer, the second part of the day would often be used for a rapid journey to the sea, not more than half an hour away, or the working member(s) would go directly to their resort house after work, to meet the rest of the family. Nature and its resources were still quite near to the city.

This leisurely rhythm of life involved essentially the middle and upper classes, the white collar population. The less well-to-do lived under a variety of conditions. Many of the fresh immigrants had recreated, in the illegal shanty-towns that surrounded the 'official' city, a kind of village life. Others lived inside the bourgeois neighborhoods, occupying the lower levels of the new high-rise buildings and working as concierges, servants, etc. The older industrial neighborhoods in Pireaus or along the northern part of the valley of Kephisos had their own communities in which the industrial rhythm prevailed.

The tourist would find in Athens an ideal city. He could enjoy the recently created tourist facilities and attractions: the Athens festival, the landscaping of the surroundings of the Acropolis, the museums. He could share the leisurely rhythm of life in the plazas and the taverns and he would profit from the proximity of the sea resorts to enjoy a yet unpolluted sea.

Athens in the sixties was attractive, many of her inhabitants enjoyed good life and almost all shared a strong feeling of optimism about their future. The conurbation of Athens was the most prosperous and the most fast growing region in the country. The Greek movies of this period are a category by themselves: they depicted the life of the Athenian middle-class, setting a model and promoting the image of life in the capital, strengthening thus her attraction and therefore the inflow of population. During two decades, from 1950 to 1970, the population of the Athens conurbation doubled. It was almost three million in 1971 (2,800,000). It had taken a century for Athens to attain a million inhabitants; it took only 25 more years to add another million; the third million has been added in less than 15 years. Although the rate of growth has been somehow lower in the period 1971-1981, Athens continued to grow to reach 3.3 millions in 1981.

In the late sixties the framework of the city started to show the first signs of cracking under the pressure of growth, as if the two millions was the maximum population that could be accommodated. At summer one could feel the crowding, in the streets, in the plazas, as well as in the beaches. The public spaces were simply not enough for the people that had been amassed in the capital.

The catalyst of crisis though has been the automobile. The late sixties had been a period of economic boom, of the development of the consumer society and of a dramatic growth of car ownership in Athens. As more and more people used their cars inside the city, the main arteries of the center became congested. The traffic jams spread rapidly outward. The radiocentric structure of the streets facilitated this spread. As a result, the speed of public transport vehicles was cut to half as they shared the same congested streets with the

private cars.

Doxiadis had already observed air pollution at that period and had pictures taken which showed the formation of what was to be called "the cloud" (to sinefo). The problems of congestion and air pollution were not, however, yet perceived as of major importance, and the political situation at the late sixties, the military dictatorship, didn't leave much opportunity for dialogue. The public opinion was more and more concerned over the issue of the political regime, neglecting the environmental problems.

One of the inheritances of the dictatorship to the democratic government in 1974 has been the environmental and functional crisis of Athens. The new national leader, Constantine Karamanlis, coming from Paris after an exile of more than ten years, and not wishing to imitate the dictators in having the police open the way for his car, shared with the rest of the Athenians the long waiting in the congested traffic on his way to his office and had a first-hand experience of the problems of Athens. As he had done in the fifties as Minister of Public Works and Premier, he took a direct interest in the question of Urban Planning of Athens. However, the problems were much more difficult to solve than in the past. It took more than four years to formulate a comprehensive urban planning policy, and this policy has not been implemented.

Meanwhile, the urban crisis developed more and more. The various responses of the public authorities have in general been short-sighted, leading often to the aggravation of the problems that they were supposed to alleviate. The deployment of the crisis took the form of a series of interactions between traffic conditions, pollution and land use patterns in a chain reaction process.

As we have seen, during the late sixties the center started to get congested and very soon the traffic jams extended to the main arteries passing through densely built neighborhoods. Thus, by the mid seventies an area covered by a radius of about 1.5 miles around the center had been completely congested. Meanwhile, the public transport system was becoming more and more inefficient: from 479 trips per person and per year in 1966 the use of the buses in Athens had fallen to 180 by 1978. The more the public transport system became slow and uncomfortable, the more people used their cars and the more congested the streets became, rendering thus the functioning of the public transport system ever worse.

Conditions were rapidly worsening in downtown Athens because of noise and air pollution, high population densities, lack of public and green spaces, difficulties in parking. People were finding out that going by car to the center from the densely built neighborhoods was almost as difficult as from the suburbs, since the most time consuming part of the trip consisted in getting through the congestion. This set off suburbanization. The more well-to-do families started abandoning the central districts of Athens for the old sea resorts like Phaliron and Glyfada, which have soon been transformed to suburbs, or for the northern suburbs, like Psychico and Philothei, or finally for the newly developed areas around the old villages of Halandri and Marousi. This first wave of suburbanization caused population to move as far as about 5 miles from the center. The use of the car became a necessity and in many families a second car has been added to the first.

In the beginning, this outward move offered certain advantages to people

escaping from the crowded parts of the city. As more and more people moved out, however, congestion followed them along the major avenues leading from the center to the suburbs. It often took an hour to cover the five miles from one's home to one's office. As people tried to adapt their habits so as to avoid the peak hours, congestion extended not only spatially but also temporally: there were traffic jams all through the day.

The problem of air pollution started to become more and more of a threat at this same period, during the mid and late seventies. The energy crisis of 1973 had led to restrictions in the use of private cars: each car could be circulated one day out of two, according to its registration number. The alternating use of cars had been applied sporadically during the mid seventies and slowly, without admitting it at first, it has been turned from 1982 onwards into a measure for the control of congestion and pollution in Athens. An area has been defined which corresponds roughly to a circle of a radius of about 1.5 miles around the center. In this area the alternating use of the private car is applied all through the week with the exception of week-ends and holidays.

Alternating circulation brought at first some relief, since traffic conditions became better in the central part of the conurbation and buses could move more freely. It did not take long, however, for traffic to adapt to the new conditions. New problems appeared, like the extension of congestion in a circle around the limits of the prohibited zone. Traffic that could not cross the center had to circumvent it, and thus the total distance of the trips was lengthened. Those conditions led to a redistribution of air pollution which lessened in the central part but extended outward. On the other hand, the traffic restrictions rendered access to the center even more difficult than in the past.

A lot of commercial development took place during the seventies on the main arteries leading to the suburbs. Commerce followed the movement of customers, but not as far as the suburbs, where the densities were still low. The new concentrations of commerce grew on the edges between the dense city fabric and the suburbia. The neighborhood of Ambelokipi is a typical example of such a commercial success of the seventies.

This outward movement of commerce had its roots in the problem of congestion. Alternating circulation started a second similar phenomenon, the outward move of the service sector. Conditions of access to the center were becoming so difficult that many companies decided to move outside the restricted zone, but as near to the center as possible. They relocated their offices on the outer edge of the restricted area. Ambelokipi constitutes thus again a typical example of a neighborhood that received activities, but maybe even more typical is the office development along the Singrou avenue.

One more step in the same direction has been the establishment of important public services, and even of whole Ministries, at the same 'edge' zone. Every time that a new public service was created or that the extension of an old one was planned, a location outside the old center would be chosen, for a variety of reasons: convenience of the employees, greater supply of land and finally the belief that by doing so the Government was contributing in relieving the pressure of the center, that each such decision was a step towards decentralization.

Each and all of those developments were contributing to the disruption of the unity of the old center, which was exploding towards all directions. It was becoming less and less easy to go from one service to another without using a car. The efficiency of the center depends on the ease by which flows take place inside a complex network of connections. The most traditional form of those flows is physical movement of people and goods. As the various parts of the center of Athens were becoming more and more distant the one from the other, ease of contact was diminishing and the level of efficiency was decreasing. In addition, as trips by foot from one building block to another were replaced by trips by car from one neighborhood to another, more congestion and pollution were added. Thus, the functional problem has been doubled by an environmental one.

By the late seventies, a second stage in the urban crisis of Athens had been attained. Worsening of living conditions in the central neighborhoods, congestion of the center and a beginning of air-pollution were the manifestations of the first stage. The second stage was characterized by chaotic suburbanization, explosion of the center, expansion of the congested zone and dramatic increase of air pollution.

Those phenomena have been further developed during the third stage of the crisis, which is still evolving. Congestion and pollution are expanding and the Government's efforts to limit traffic through more restrictions are desperate efforts to calm down the public opinion rather than real steps towards less pollution.

Meanwhile two apparently opposite trends have started to appear.

The first trend is represented by a number of families that return to the center. The near suburbs are now almost as polluted as the central neighborhoods and as congestion is everywhere, the real, geometrical distance from the center has started to be important again.

The other trend is a further escape to even remoter suburbs like those of Vouliagmeni, Kifissia and Ekali. It essentially concerns the wealthier families. In this way, the actual trends tend to re-equilibrate the growth rates of the various parts of the conurbation: the central neighborhoods, the near and the more distant suburbs.

The trend of return to the center is a rather positive evolution for the city, although expressing the impasse of the middle income family. The growth of the more distant suburbs has advantages and disadvantages. The main problems related to it is that those suburbs tend to become a self-contained wealthy town, with her own markets, services, even private universities. For the first time in the modern Greek city a community of the rich distinguishes itself so clearly from the rest of the population. It is the first case of extensive spatial segregation, a phenomenon which can lead to a series of social and urban problems.

The commercial and the service sector are restructuring themselves to follow the escape of the upper class from the city and the near suburbs. In the previous stage, commercial and other facilities developed at the 'edge' between the densely built neighborhoods and the near suburbs; in the same way during the

actual stage, the luxury commerce develops midway between the near and the more distant suburbs. It grows along the highways (and thus is addressed exclusively to car users) or inside the old village cores, producing concentrations that radiate congestion and pollution. The small streets of Halandri, Marusi and Kifissia are nowadays at least as much congested as the center of Athens.

If things are left as they are, perspectives are definitely grim for Athens. It is true that certain adaptation processes do take place spontaneously, like the rehabilitation of certain central neighborhoods or the organization of life on a decentralized basis in the suburbs. It is difficult though to predict if those processes will have positive or negative results in the long run. The general phenomenon still seems to remain, in any case, the proliferation of trips, the extension of congestion and the intensification of pollution.

The crisis that we have tried to sketch has also other aspects, probably just as important as the ones mentioned. Such is for example the degradation of the natural environment in the areas that surround Athens. In fact, if one of the attractions of Athens of the sixties was easy accessibility to natural resources, the Athenians of today are having a hard time trying to find an unpolluted beach.

The causes of the crisis

Athens is not the only city that has had to face the challenge of technological change and demographic growth. Since the nineteenth century, urbanization has been creating urban problems everywhere, as masses of rural population rush into the urban scene. At the same time, the new transport technologies, the streetcars, the trains and then the automobiles have been creating opportunities and difficulties for cities. For most of them, the era of the automobile has been a time of crisis and many still carry the scars of their efforts at adaptation, like the highways crossing the downtowns of most big American cities. However, most of the cities have managed more or less, to reach a new equilibrium, after some time.

To understand why Athens constitutes an exception to this rule, we have to examine her crisis in the context of the specific characteristics of Greece, among which the role of Athens occupies a very important position. In the first part of this paper, the critical importance of Athens in the construction of the Greek national State has been shown, as well as the fact that the Athenian influence extends to the limits of the Modern Greek Oikoumene. This extended hinterland explains the size of Athens, which should not be compared with only that of Greece, since the Greek territory is not the only hinterland of Athens.

The role of Athens as the national core, as the bridge between Greece and the world, as the center of Hellenism, is not always recognized and often Athens is considered to be, by its size, a burden for the country. In fact, the image of Athens fluctuates with the successes or the difficulties of the nation-building process. One of the most critical periods for national unity, during which many of the old centrifugal tendencies reemerged, has been the period that followed the Second World War, the German occupation and the Civil War.

The Civil War was a challenge to Athenian leadership and when it ended the economic, social and political situation was so bad that civil peace was precarious. After the War, Athens had to face the challenge of peace. The ways by which Athens (meaning the political power structures having their seat in the capital) met the challenge are highly significant for understanding the roots of today's urban crisis. A process of political recuperation through economic recovery was set off, many aspects of which, and especially those concerning the development and the redevelopment of urban space, were neither planned for, and probably not even conscious.

The promotion of the image of Athens, the effort to show that life in the capital was pleasant, interesting and free from all the elements that cast their shadow on the provincial environment - the authoritarian social structures, the conservative moral attitudes, etc. - represented a promise for a better life. The basic theme in most Greek movies of that time was social promotion. A poor young man who by being intelligent, serious and hard working would gain the confidence of his boss and the hand of his boss's daughter represents a typical scenario. Living in Athens became thus an ideal and a goal for the provincial bourgeoisie, which sent its younger and more dynamic elements to Athens, first to study and then to establish themselves in the capital. Very few of the graduates of the University of Athens returned to their hometown. All the potential local elites have thus been drained towards Athens. In the sixties Greece was much more reduced to 'Athens and the Greek desert' than France was to Paris et le désert français, as the title of the famous book of Gravier indicated.

The promise of the 'good life' and prosperity to immigrants had to be kept, if it was to have the needed political results. Athens did become during the fifties and sixties, an enormous machine of social promotion. The means have been, to a large extent, the mechanisms of land speculation.

There is a major difference between the structures of land speculation in Athens and in most other big cities of the world. In Athens land speculation has been for and by the masses. It touched a very large part of the population and was organized by levels, starting from that of civil engineers, building a great number of high-rise buildings, to that of the rural immigrants who constructed their 'illegal' houses with their own hands on a plot outside the officially developed areas.

There have been two major mechanisms related to land speculation, by which Athens has been constructed and reconstructed during the fifties and the sixties: the 'legal' one, called 'antiparokhi', by which all the low-rise houses have been replaced by five to seven story buildings; and the 'illegal' one, which consisted in building on rural land, divided into small plots.

The antiparokhi mechanism has emerged in the early fifties as a response to high demand for housing and lack of capital. The main actors in the system were three: the land-owner, the developer, and the buyers. The land-owner contributed the plot, on which in most cases a house, his own, already existed. It usually was a two story house, often of not more than twenty or thirty years of age, surrounded by a garden. In exchange, he got a promise from the developer that once the new building would be completed, he would become the owner of a part of it, at least of equal surface to the house to be demolished. Thus, the

developer needed to pay nothing to acquire the land. After making the deal with the land-owner, the developer would sell the apartments on the plan. The buyers accepted to pay a part of the price in advance and the rest according to the progress of the work. With the first down payments, the developer acquired enough money to start construction and he continued receiving money after the completion of each stage, until the end of the process.

This system appeared to have only advantages. It offered to the land-owner a number of modern apartments in return to his old house which had none of modern amenities.

For the developer it was a way to get into business without or with very little capital. Fortunes have been made out of nothing, and the antiparokhi system has contributed substantially in making the profession of the developer a very enviable one, especially if the professional quality was accompanied by a degree of engineering, which added prestige and opened the doors of the 'good society'.

The buyers were mostly employees, public servants and other white-collar population, people with a provincial or a poor background, often with a University degree and in the process of social promotion. They usually had some initial capital which came out of the sale of land in their home country and lived out of one (or two) salaries. The capital would serve as the down-payment and a part of their salary for the monthly payments. This system was thus well-adapted to their possibilities.

Finally, the national economy has been able to mobilize the hidden capital. The industrial development of the fifties and the 'Greek economic miracle' are due to the boom of the construction industry based on the antiparokhi.

In this too perfect arrangement, there was however a major, though unseen at the time, flaw. The prerequisite for its success was that the developer would be able to produce enough floor space to satisfy the demands of the land-owner and be left with sufficient space to sell so as to be able to finance the construction and keep a sizable profit. All those conditions meant one thing, that the development ratio, and therefore the population densities would have to rise considerably. On the plot on which two families used to live, twenty more would be accommodated.

Athens as it had been built before the war was characterized by low densities. The urban planning officials used to complain about the cost of infrastructure because of that fact. There was thus a certain margin for consolidation and, during the first years, the replacement of the old houses by the new brought animation and attracted small commerce into the somehow dull neighborhoods. The public transport system developed its network since there was a sufficient number of customers and thus the old inhabitants enjoyed a better service.

As however more and more houses were being replaced by apartment buildings, people started to feel too much crowded. In the past there was little need for public spaces since each house had its own garden and people enjoyed the pleasant climatic conditions of Athens by spending a lot of time outdoors. The high-rise buildings shut them into apartments with no contact with nature and it was then

that the lack of public gardens and plazas really began to be felt. During summer, conditions became almost suffocating in the city. It was then that the massive and completely anarchic development of resort areas started. Some of the most precious landscapes of Attika have been destroyed by this process.

Things grew worse in the late sixties as car ownership developed. There was no place to park and as cars moved through the corridor-like streets they created air and noise pollution. All those densely built neighborhoods were however still relatively attractive as long as the public transport system remained efficient, because of accessibility to the center. When, however, the public transport system broke down, they lost every advantage, and the outward move of population began.

The development of the economy of Athens necessitated inexpensive working force. The conditions in the countryside at first, and then the image of Athens attracted population to the capital. Thus, the demand for hands has been satisfied. This new working population needed shelter, which could not be provided by the antiparokhi system. The economy did not have the strength to support a social housing program, nor had the public service the competence needed to run it. The immigrants had to find a solution by themselves. Large pieces of rural land have been divided into small parcels, often as small as 2,000 square feet, and sold as rural lots (agrotemakhia). The land-owner would trace an elementary network of roads, which was the only investment he made. Not only did he sell at a considerably higher price than that of the market of rural land but, by keeping a large part of the land unsold, he anticipated the even greater rise of land values after the development and consolidation of the neighborhood that was to emerge.

As those parcels were rural land, their owners did not have the right to build on them, and this is the reason for which the establishments created in this manner are called 'illegal'. The Governments have had three choices in the face of those 'de facto' created developments: to let be, to demolish, or to give legal status to those illegal constructions. Very seldom did they demolish, they usually let be and during election or other politically critical times they would 'legalize' large parts of those 'shanty towns'. Their growth, as well as the emergence of a whole market of illegal construction, has taken place with the silent approval of many consecutive Governments, democratic and dictatorial.

The reasons for this were economic, political and social. Economic since thus it was possible to keep the cost of the working force low, an important advantage for an industry on its take-off stage. Political, because the Governments had thus an efficient instrument to exert pressure (the threat of demolition) or to buy votes (the promise of legalization). Finally social, because the process of purchasing the land, building a shelter, attaining the legal status, getting the infrastructure (water, electricity, etc.) and finally participating in the antiparokhi system by exchanging what had become urban land for apartments, was in fact a process of social integration. The working class started having more and more things to lose, apart from its chains: land, a house, and, last but not least, the promise of speculation.

The consequences of illegal construction, were at least as serious as those of antiparokhi. The city extended in a utterly chaotic way, with no plan coordinating urban development with site characteristics, infrastructure

investment and location of employment. Infrastructure was added a posteriori, the cost of it was greater and the quality much worse than had it preceded development. Many environmental hazards, like floods or damages caused by earthquakes originate from construction that took place in sites which were inappropriate for development.

All the major problems of the capital are related to illegal construction. As the shanty towns did not relate to any general plan for transport facilities, creation of secondary centers or other urban amenities, they put more and more pressure on the center of Athens and on the streets leading to it. Anarchic and diffuse patterns of commercial and other facilities developing in and around illegal or previously illegal neighborhoods led to the generalization of congestion and pollution.

A second serious consequence of the illegal construction has been the development of strong interest groups. A certain mentality according to which illegal construction is not 'immoral', but it is rather the State who is in the wrong in trying to limit the 'freedoms' of land development started to emerge more and more. This 'institutionalization' of illegality strengthened considerably the whole complex of land speculation interest groups. The network of ramifications of land speculation in the economic and political life became of considerable influence and constitutes the major obstacle to all effort for a rational urban planning policy.

The efforts for an efficient urban planning policy

We have seen that after the overthrow of the dictatorship and the return to democracy, the Premier found out by himself the extent of the congestion problems by waiting inside the traffic jam. He initiated at once an effort to cope with the major problems. A number of projects have thus been started after 1974: the extension of the one-line subway, the new airport at Mesogia and a series of new highways around the capital have been designed and some started to be realized during the Karamanlis period. The fragmentation of rural land for illegal building purposes has been prohibited by law. However, most projects advanced slowly compared to the urgency of the situation and appeared as fragmentary, since there was no general concept about the nature of the crisis and the way by which each measure would contribute in solving it. There seemed to be no general strategy.

It was only after 1978 that a coherent urban planning policy has been formulated. This policy, defined by Minister of the Environment Stephanos Manos, was founded on three elements:

A regional policy. According to it, the demographic pressure on Athens could be relieved by enhancing the attractiveness of the other cities of Greece rather than by trying to stop growth through restriction of land development, which

led to illegal construction, or by letting Athens choke to death.¹ A few provincial towns have been chosen to be 'growth poles'. Plans have been prepared for them anticipating rapid growth of their population.

The second policy concerned the mechanisms of land development. As we have seen, many of the problems of Athens are related to high densities in the 'legal' areas and to the anarchic growth of 'illegal' shanty towns. To cope with the first problem, the building regulations have been changed, limiting the ratio of land development and thus indirectly the densities. The provision of a minimum of parking space per inhabitant in new developments has been made obligatory.

Those first measures were met with a strong opposition by the Greek Chamber of Engineers, who considered that they would make the crisis in the construction industry worse. Much more controversy, however, has been created by the second element of this policy, defining new rules for developing land. According to them, the owners of rural land wishing to transform it to urban land in order to develop it, would have to contribute, in land and in money, to the cost of the transformation. The legal procedure was defined in the law 947/79. This law has been attacked as anti-popular by the left wing parties. Politicians from the right wing have preferred to denounce it as socialist, as an instrument by which the State would be able to take the land out of the hands of its owners.

The law 947 did, in fact, represent a radical change and thus a real danger for the whole network of land speculation. It limited the profits that land-owners would be able to realize through the change in land use, change for which they had been accustomed to contribute nothing. Had the law been applied, it would have given to the public authorities the instruments to organize the space in and around new developments and would have produced a more than sufficient offer of urban land for development, cutting thus the grass under the feet of illegal construction. The political pressure of the threatened interest groups stopped however the implementation of this law, as well as that of the Athens Master Plan.

The Athens Master Plan has been the third element of the new policy. It was, essentially, an application of the experience of other major cities which had to cope with similar problems in the past, and in this sense it was not original.

The previously designed projects, the subway, the new airport, and the highways, have been integrated into a coherent whole. A number of other elements have been added. Thus, the older part of the center of Athens, known as the Plaka, was to be 'pedestrianized' as a way to save it from decline; a number of secondary centers would be created to absorb deconcentration. Those centers would be linked with the rest of the conurbation by highways and by subway. Substantial development of new land was anticipated to facilitate the spatial redistribution of population, in order to diminish the population pressure on congested areas.

¹ This last solution was seriously proposed. Any new investment in infrastructure, according to its proponents, would only create additional population inflow and lead to more congestion.

The plan aimed to channel the existing tendencies into forms that would lead to less problems. The creation of secondary centers would save the old villages from congestion, limit the diffusion of offices and commerce which created new traffic, structure the suburbs and make the use of public transport more attractive.

The reaction of the vested interests blocked the implementation of these three policies, especially after 1980, when Mr. Plytas replaced Mr. Manos in the Ministry of the Environment. The elections of 1981 marked the end of the efforts to react to the deterioration of conditions in Athens. The socialist governments considered that any investment in Athens was contrary to their concept of decentralization policy and stopped all the major projects. Instead of financing what they called 'vitrine public works' they preferred to distribute the funds to small projects all over the country. Those could be completed much faster and satisfy a wider political clientele. For similar reasons they did not pursue the policy of organized and planned land development. There is no doubt that, had the Manos policy been implemented, the situation would not have deteriorated as it has and now, ten years after the formulation of the policy, improvement would have already started to appear. Thus, the urban crisis of Athens has not been an inevitable catastrophe, as some still think, but the result of human decisions.

However, denouncing the 'lack of political will', does not lead very far in defining the causes of the crisis. What seems more important is to try to understand the deeper currents that generated public reaction, which the politicians expressed by discontinuing the policies formulated in the years 1978-80.

A first explanation that comes to the mind is related to the strength of the vested interests that were threatened by the new policy of land development. The diffused character of those vested interests, the fact that a great number of people hoped to earn from land speculation, explains the force of opposition, at least in the initial stages.

However, all through the years of crisis, the inhabitants of Athens have been suffering more and more. Why have they accepted environmental deterioration in such a passive way? On the other hand, the economy of Athens is declining and the whole economy of the country is handicapped by that decline. The economic consequences alone could counterbalance the vested interests in land speculation, but have failed to do so.

At this point it is necessary to go back to history and trace the cultural substratum of political action and the deeper roots of political behavior. Athens as a city, has been trapped between two opposed elements: the tradition of regionalistic structures, and the centralizing forces. The former represent the political past and the deeper Greek cultural heritage. The latter have been the essential element of the nation-building process; they express the influence of the Diaspora rather than that of the indigenous element.

Athens, as the seat of the centralization process, has been the space of the outsiders, perceived at times as conquerors by the indigenous population. The resentment of the regionalist elements towards the centralizing capital has not

had the chance to express itself very often and it could hardly get articulated, since one of the basic components of the strategy of the center has been to absorb all the potential elements of local elites.

This latent enmity towards the world of the capital has only found outlet at times of crisis. The two major internal conflicts of the contemporary Greek history, the Royalist/Venizelist conflict and the Civil War, express among other things this profound cultural contradiction which is at the roots of contemporary Greece.

In what way does this contradiction influence the urban crisis of Athens? As long as the leadership of the center was strong and confident, Athens prospered, while at moments of contestation of the values of the center, Athens was put under pressure. It is in this way that we should interpret the recent refusal of the Greek society in its whole to finance the public works which were necessary for the recovery of its capital. This refusal expressed itself through an ideology of decentralization and by the support of the Greek provinces to the socialist party.

The State found itself unable to defend the capital against the pressure of the periphery. Another actor that could be expected to intervene in favor of Athens are its own inhabitants. We must remember, however, that most of them are newcomers.

Some arrived to Athens from the Diaspora. They are people 'on the move', they do not have roots or strong ties with the city in which they live. Many have in fact left Athens for other big cities of the world when the crisis started. They do not represent the kind of population that would put up a fight to protect environmental quality.

A larger part of the Athenians have come from the countryside. They carried with them a deep-rooted and largely unconscious resentments towards the capital. Being divided between their cultural roots and their present conditions of life they are, at best, reduced to a passive state. The attitude of some of them can be described as that of the Conquistadors. They are in Athens to profit as much as possible of the prosperity of the city, without trying to develop its resources and often destroying them in order to maximize their profit.

Abandoned by the state, betrayed by its own inhabitants, on what force can Athens turn for support? The population which has real roots in Athens, the old Athenians, have been losing influence through the years. The Second World War and the Civil War wrecked the old Athenian bourgeoisie and the growth of Athens during the post-war period limited its influence. However, they are still present inside the limits of the City of Athens, among a population which represents about a fourth of the total population of the conurbation. Their natural spokesman is the Mayor of Athens. He represents the most important force that could express the interests of the City, together with a few other institutions, like the Chamber of Industry and Commerce of Athens.

It is at this point that appears the second trap in which Athens finds herself. The State, by breaking down the structures of the local government in its effort to impose centralization, has limited the possibilities of the Mayors to act in any efficient way. In addition, the municipal elections in Athens,

because of the prestige of the capital, have a more general significance and fall on the general track of the national political issues more than in any other city of the country. The Mayor of Athens becomes thus much more the spokesman of the party that has supported him, than of the interests of the Athenians.

Conclusion

It has been shown that the urban crisis of Athens, although complex, is not in any sense original. Other cities have had to cope with similar or more difficult problems and have managed to do so successfully. The size of Athens, which is considered by many to be the major origin of its present difficulties, does not justify such a judgement. With three or even four million people, Athens is still much smaller than most of the major cities of the world .

The crisis of Athens has followed a certain sequence in its unfolding. The mechanism of the crisis appears as dominated by the economic factor: land speculation, rise of the automobile ownership, congestion, change of land-use, more congestion and pollution, more change in land-uses. We have seen that it is related to the political and the social factors as much as to the economic. To this mechanism, certain political structures have tried to oppose an urban planning strategy. This strategy, had it been implemented, would have been successful. However, a deep movement in the public opinion prevented its application.

How to explain this movement? The hypothesis of the opposition of the vested interests of land speculation provides only a partial explanation. The negative economic consequences of the crisis weigh by far more than the interests that were threatened by the urban planning policy.

The hypothesis proposed in this paper is that we should search for an explanation in the cultural domain and in the deeper political structures which have been conditioned by the opposition between forces of regionalism and forces of centralization in the Greek history since the 1830's. According to this hypothesis, the weakening of the values of centralization, the indifference of the inhabitants who are mostly newcomers, and the impotence of a municipal government reduced to marginality by the process of centralization, leaves Athens without defense in face of regionalistic hostility.

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