



Young Greeks' Social Representation of Protest: Dialogical Structure and Ideological Function

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

Public protest has been a controversial form of political participation which aims to intervene in the socio-political status quo by promoting or preventing social change. The political and social life in Greece has been greatly influenced by public protests which, in several cases, acted as regulators and drivers of change. The main interest of this study is to examine public protest as an object of social representation of young Greeks in the current socio-political and historical context. Obtaining data from focus groups, we use recent dialogical approaches to Social Representation Theory to examine the content, the emerging identities, as well as the structure and the ideological function of protest representation amongst young Greeks. Our findings indicate that protests' representation is conceptualized on the basis of dialectical antitheses and contradictory identities; the idealistic perception of public protest is based on the conceptualization of the identity of active citizen and purposeful protesters, while the violent side of protests emerges from the identity of rioters and protest armies. We argue that these main elements of protest representation also determine its internal structure. In addition, they have an implicit ideological function as they express the way in which young Greeks discuss, negotiate, assimilate and redefine public protest under their set of beliefs and their worldview concerning social reality.

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INTRODUCTION

Public protest has been a controversial form of political participation – often with unorthodox methods – whose aim is to intervene in the socio-political status quo by promoting or preventing social change (della Porta & Diani, 2006). Since the mid-19th century, the political and social life in Greece has been greatly influenced by public protests which, in several cases, acted as regulators and drivers of change. The main interest of this study is to examine protest representations through interviews with young Greek citizens, by adopting principles of recent dialogical approaches to Social Representation Theory (Howarth, 2006, 2014; Markova, 2000; Moloney & Walker, 2002; Moloney et al., 2020) as well as the ideological origins and their functional role of this representation in constructing social reality.

SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS THEORY AND THE STUDY OF PUBLIC PROTEST

The Social Representations Theory (SRT) is a sociopsychological theory, first developed by Serge Moscovici in 1961. Social representations can be viewed as localised systems of meaning (Jovchelovitch, 2007) which embody world-making processes (Moscovici, 1988) and are constructed as an integral part of the efforts of social group to create and define their common understanding of their social world. Moscovici (1963) defines the social representation as the collective processing of a social object which is action- and communication-oriented (Wagner et al., 1999). In addition, it is this process that creates a system of values, ideas and practices (Moscovici, 1973) which collectively provide a common ground for social interactions and mutual shaping of the social reality among group members. Theorists of SRT regard social objects as constructed by and within groups (Voelklein & Howarth, 2005; Wagner, 1998), thus enabling the common understanding and social interactions within them. This dialogical co-constructionist approach (Markova, 2000) rejects the distinction between individual and collective representations, as the presence of the ‘other’ is constant and it is “implicated based on past social experience” (Bauer & Gaskell, 1999: 170).

From an epistemological standpoint, although some approaches put emphasis on the structure of SRs conceiving them as largely consensual (Abric, 1993, 1996; Guimelli, 1993), other schools of thought also describe SRT as a ‘social constructivist as well as a discursively oriented approach’ (Wagner et al., 1999, p. 96). This description stems not only from the emphasis of SRT on the dialectic relationship between the subject, the object, and the social context, but also from the new perspective that SRT has offered in terms of understanding and studying social phenomena. Social representations study the relations of the politics of social change (Elcherth et al., 2011; Howarth, 2006), by taking into consideration the social and cultural context of participation (Howarth et al., 2014), and by exploring ‘the

ambiguity, tension and dispute within both salient social representations in specific encounters and relationships as well as within the general practice of social re-presentation itself’ (Howarth, 2006: 84). Recent studies on the social representations of protest, especially riots, although not aligned to the structural approach of SRT, focus on the specific way in which the latter are represented within a social group or community and are conceptualized as sense-making processes that embody the concepts of identity and/or ideology (Howarth, 2014; Stott & Reicher, 2011; Veneti et al., 2018; Zamperini et al., 2012).

Despite the role of social representations in constructing a consensual field of shared meanings has been recognized as a critical element of SRT, the existence of ambiguous or even contradictory elements within social representations is a constantly emerging theme in SRT research (Marková, 1982; Miglietta & Acquadro Maran, 2017; Moloney & Walker, 2002). Trying to depict the conflicting images of the social representation of organ donor and transplantation in Australia, Moloney and Walker (2002) use Guimelli’s (1993) and Abric’s (1993, 1996) Core Theory, which conceives the structure of the representational field as comprised of

two categories of elements, core and peripheral, that play different roles in maintaining the representation. The core elements generate the overall meaning and determine the representation’s organization, while the peripheral elements allow the core elements to become reality by serving as an interface between the core elements and the actuality of the world (Moloney & Walker, 2002: 301).

They also adopt Guimelli’s (1998) thesis and Abric’s and Tafani’s (1995) findings that the core elements of representations have a normative and a functional dimension. The normative dimension defines the internal structure and function of the representation, such as the socio-political, cultural and historical context and the ideological freight of the social object within the group. Abric and Tafani (1995) explain that the activation of normative dimension in individuals with minimal experience with the object of representation is explained due to the fact that the normative dimension mainly draws the representation’s broad outline and content. On the other hand, the functional dimension is ‘concerned with the relations that individuals maintain’ (Moloney & Walker, 2002: 302) and presupposes the subject’s familiarization with the content of the representation and its actualization in social reality.

Examining the ideological function of social representations, Howarth et al. (2014) have explored the role of social representations as a tool to study the politics of participation, especially in modern, multicultural and transnational societies, in which the concept of multiple identities is prevalent and forms

of political participation are not limited to the official political sphere. Adopting a social epistemology which focuses on the implied political character of all aspects of social life, Howarth et al. (2014) view SRT as a useful approach to study the construction of social reality and the veiled power relations that promote the definition and prevalence of certain representations over others. Under this perspective, we agree with Howarth's (2014) thesis that social representations of protest can be seen simultaneously as 'symbolic' or 'ideological forms' and conceptual entities of understanding the social world as well as expressions of individuals' engagement with everyday politics which are emerged within inter-related and conflicting power relations and shape the individual ideological frame. In this way, the social representations of protests are simultaneously shaped by the ideological perceptions of the individual and also shape the boundaries of social reality, being an explicit reflection of their ideology on the specific social object.

The implicit ideological freight of the concept of social representations, their function in shaping social reality and in creating (more or less) consensual representational fields, make SRT a useful tool for examining the contentious politics of social protest. However, the theoretical sociopsychological framework of SRT has been used in relatively few studies to this day on this specific field (Batel & Castro, 2014; Bigl, 2019; Di Giacomo, 1980; Howarth, 2014; Litton & Potter, 1985; Zamperini et al., 2012).

Di Giacomo's (1980) quantitative study on the rise and decline of an active student movement in Belgium is one of the first to address the relationship between social representations, collective action, and ideology. Although Di Giacomo recognizes that evaluative criteria based on a group's ideology lie at the heart of social representations, he also claims that the concept of ideology is insufficient unless closely linked and compared to groups' social identities. Litton and Potter (1985) used the SRT to study the explanatory resources used by different actors that participated in the street riots in St Paul to account for racial tensions and government expenditures. They concluded that different interpretations of the same social object (riots) may coexist with shared representations among groups.

Zamperini et al. (2012) examined the social representations on the violent protests in 2001 G8 Summit in Genoa of actors who identified themselves as peaceful protesters and concluded that they represented the violent events as the result of a battle between violent protesters (Black bloc) establishing their identity in opposition to the police. In addition, Howarth's extended work on social representations and their role in understanding the politics of everyday life (2002, 2006, 2007, 2014) also includes the study of crowd representations in the 1995 Brixton riots (Howarth, 2014). By examining different accounts of crowd representations in this series of events, Howarth (2014) describes two competing representations in different participant-observer groups and argues that

social representations and their evaluative role should be seen as 'a process in the negotiation of identity' (Howarth, 2014: 41) of ideological nature. She concludes that antithetic social representations of the same social object should be interpreted as parts of representational networks with contradictory elements that confirm the 'polyphasic nature of representations' (Howarth, 2014: 53). Drawing on Reicher's work on crowd behavior and collective action, which adopts a Social Identity Theory perspective (Reicher, 1987, 2004; Stott & Reicher, 2011), Howarth (2014) views the function of representations in a historical and socio-political context and argues that individuals' unique conception of personal and social identity leads to different manipulation of processing and anchoring representations. This unique conception of representations leads to different ways of sharing their content in social interactions, such as collective actions. A similar conceptualization of social representations is also present in a study of a resident protest movement against the transformation of a Lisbon neighborhood convent. In this study Batel and Castro (2014) examined how social change is negotiated through social representations of protesters and how protesters use these representations not only to establish their identity, or oppose conflicting parties, but also to create a space of communication between them and the general public, as a third-party, independent actor in the conflict.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF GREEK PUBLIC PROTEST

The modern history of Greece, post-World War II, has been shaped by the political and social repercussions of huge peaceful rallies (e.g., 1963, 1975, 1992, 2015, 2018) protests and violent riots (1973, 2008, 2010–2011). Public protests, although frequent in the 1950s and 1960s, were characterized by the formal and informal ostracization of the Left from the Greek political scene, and the constant draconian public surveillance of protesters by state forces and parastatal organizations. The seven-year military Junta suppressed any form of public protest, only to be overthrown in 1973, under the pressure of the aftermath of a bloody uprising in the Technical University of Athens (Polytechnio), held mainly by the student movement. It is true that the 1973 student movement uprising not only defined the fall of Junta and the political evolution towards the democratization in Greece, but also shaped the conceptualization and shared beliefs among Greeks with regards to one's involvement in contentious politics and protests. Karyotis and Rudig (2017) describe the main aspects of the modern representation of the protest culture in Greece as a 'historically romanticised and glorified view of contentious politics, largely rooted in the successful struggle against the military junta in the 1970s' (Karyotis & Rudig, 2017: 160).

In the following decades, from 1974 to 1990, although small leftist and anarchist groups continued to participate in collective action, encouraged by the legally

restored Left parties, the socialist PASOK government was able 'to contain some of the most militant parts of these movements by promising to change society from above, and forming close relationships with the trade unions that organize the majority of protests' (Rüdig & Karyotis, 2013: 495). Data from the Protest and Coercion dataset on the protest events per million inhabitants between 1990–1995 and the European Social Survey on collective action during the decades of 1990s and 2000s (used by Rüdig and Karyotis, 2013) indicate the presence of a strong protest culture in Greece which was influenced by the sociopolitical evolution of the country during these two decades. During the 1990s, the Macedonia naming dispute between Greece and (now) North Macedonia and a considerable number of general strikes organized by trade unions encouraged participation in protest events, while the subsequent period of economic growth and social prosperity in the 2000s led to a decline in protest participation.

However, the last twelve years, setting as a starting point the several-day riots following the assassination of 15-year-old student Alexis Grigoropoulos by a policeman in 2008, followed by the anti-austerity protests of 2010–2012, the 2015 bailout referendum and the 2018 'Macedonia is Greek' rallies, various forms of collective action and social protest have become an integral part of the political life of Greece (see Rüdig & Karyotis, 2013). The violent youth riots in December 2008 fueled by anger over unnecessary police violence carried a multifaceted ideological message, encompassing different national and global themes from frustration over political corruption and the (then) upcoming economic crisis to criticism against globalized capitalism and its effects (Anastasakis, 2009). However, while the 2008 riots were predominantly held by students and the anarchist movement, the 2011–2015 anti-austerity protests were marked by the emergence of the Greek 'Indignant' movement ('Aganaktismeni') and incorporated participants from a 'broad range of social strata, age groups and political affiliations' (Simiti, 2016: 42). Karyotis' and Rudig's (2017) surveys in 2011–2015 distinguish three waves of anti-austerity protests in Greece which represent the evolution of the anti-austerity movement in Greece from an 'old' movement driven by participants with prior protest experience, union trade participation, and left wing ideology to a movement which initially, focused on expression of political and social alienation, and then transformed to a 'New Social Movement' mobilizing younger people and marked by interpersonal trust, political interest and post-materialism.

AIMS OF THE STUDY

The primary goal of this study is to describe the social representations shared by young Greeks on public

protests¹ as a construct of multiple actors and identities² (della Porta & Diani, 2006; Psimitis, 2011; Reicher, 1996), and as a process that shapes young Greeks' social reality. Our analysis adopts Markova's (2000) thesis on the dialogical character of common thinking, which identifies the representational field of public protest as 'dialogically interdependent...pre-categorizations and taxonomies of oppositional nature' (Markova, 2000). This field is formed through antithesis and synthesis, and is structured around two categories of components, core and peripheral, with distinct roles in maintaining the representation (Abric, 1993; Moloney & Walker, 2002). Finally, a key assumption of the present study is that the social representations are to be examined as contestatory forms that can be manipulated ideologically in order to support the content and the aims of different identities, and form new social realities (Howarth, 2014). On these grounds, we will examine a) the content of representation of public protests shared by the Greek youth, emphasizing the description of its main elements, emerging identities and their dialectical antitheses b) the structure of this representation, recognizing its core and peripheral components, and c) its ideological function in shaping the reality of the social landscape in Greece.

METHOD

Focus groups were chosen as a research technique in the present study, to enable data collection through 'group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher' (Morgan, 1996: 130), while also allowing us to obtain in-depth information on a subject defined by the research. In the present study, five focus groups were formed with 5–6 Greek individuals per group, aged between 19 and 30. The participants (N = 26) were recruited through posts shared on social media asking individuals to participate in a study about the views of young people on social protest. Participants under 18 or over 35 years of age were excluded. There were no specific inclusion criteria. The focus groups met between April 2018 and July 2019 in the two largest cities of Greece [Athens (n = 6) and Thessaloniki (n = 5)], two small provincial towns [Rethymno (n = 5) and Sparti (n = 5)] and a small island [Ikaria (n = 5)], in an effort to encompass different sociodemographic characteristics. The participants were high school graduates. Most of them were women (n = 19), students (N = 20) and almost half (N = 12) had participated in at least one demonstration during their student years. The focus groups lasted from 50 minutes to 1.5 hours. The participants were asked to discuss their views on social protests based on open-ended questions such as 'What is your general view/attitude towards protests/demonstrations and the people who participate in them?' We did not specify the terms of the research object so as not to unintentionally restrict

the range of the different approaches of the object of representation and its significations. Focus groups were recorded and transcribed, and all participants' quotes were anonymized.

In terms of data analysis, Thematic Analysis (TA) was our method of choice owing to its accessibility and flexibility as a qualitative method of 'identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meanings (themes) across a data set' (Braun & Clarke, 2012: 57). It is this emphasis on common patterns meaningful to the research question that provides insight across data and makes TA appropriate for the exploration of collective meanings and shared experiences. The data corpus obtained by focus groups was analyzed by using the six-phase approach to thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2012). In the last decade, thematic analysis has been incorporated into social sciences as a tool of examining the genesis of social representations both theoretically (Batel & Castro, 2018; Joffe, 2012; see also Potter, 2018 for a commentary on this topic) and empirically (e.g., Arbatani, et al., 2016; Batel & Castro, 2014; De Carvalho & Skipper, 2018; Pozzi et al., 2014).

FINDINGS

Data from focus groups provided the material we used to define the main themes arising from the conversations of young Greeks on the topic of representations of social protests. Having read the content of focus groups and created codes for recognized common responses in the data corpus, two researchers searched for patterns in the participants' conceptualizations on the topic of public protest, which were reviewed by third researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2012). After the review of the initial themes, our analysis revealed two main and antithetical themes on a) the idealistic image of protest and b) the image of protest violence, which constitute the main axes of how young Greeks think about public protests. The first theme, which we will call *The idealistic perception of public protest*, emphasizes the idealized image of protest as well as its social and political character and contains two subthemes: a) the idea of public protest as a civil right b) the idea of a public protest as a politicized form of civic participation. The second theme, which we will call *Protest violence: Organized conflict or chaos* describes the iconography of protest violence and contains two subthemes: a) the image of protests as an occasion for organized conflict between political opponents b) the image of protest violence as emotion-fueled chaos. In the following sections, we will first present the content of the themes, which constitute the main archetypes of protest representation, and then, we will discuss the structure of each representation around core and peripheral elements before we conclude with an analysis of as their ideological functions.

THE IDEALISTIC PERCEPTION OF PUBLIC PROTEST

When participants were asked to describe public protests, the main theme (the first pole of the antithesis) emerging across the discourse of all focus groups was that of protest as an ideal form of political action pointing to a) the role of public protest as a civil right and obligation of active citizens, and b) the image of protest as an active and peaceful form of political participation. In this theme participants pointed out the positive and idealistic elements of public protest, such as solidarity, participation, the peaceful character, and inclusiveness and dynamism, thus conceptualizing protest as a form of collective action in participatory democracy.

Furthermore, this idealistic perception of protest seems to be strongly attached to the emerging identity of citizens as active agents in modern democracies. Public protests are presented as a tool held by young generations and active citizens to express their opinions when these are not heard by state authorities through voting. The participants' choice to emphasize the significance of protest as a civil right, to draw the idealized image of protest and to identify with the image of the active citizen when discussing and verbalizing their representation of protest highlights the elements that ideologically influence the formation of the public protests' representation but is also a reflection of how young people in Greece perceive the concept of political participation.

Public Protest as a Civil Right of the Active Citizen

Participants tended to talk about a variety of collective actions on the grounds of their aims, their motives, their connection to social movements or other political entities. Rallies, demonstrations and protests, however, were seen as a valuable and essential mechanism of democracies for the expression of public will or the suppressed voices of minorities, represented as independent from party politics and as connected to decentralized political systems. By discussing their perception on social protests, participants also described their views on the role of active citizen in participatory and contentious politics.

Extract 1

Coordinator: Could you tell me what comes to your mind when thinking about protests?

Bill (FG3): The first thing that comes to mind is that it is a legal right to protest, and obviously each government is interested to show, or to create the impression, that there is no resistance, because if there is (resistance) then this indicates its inadequacy in some issues.(...) It is our legal right, and through public protests we should express our opposition to what is happening, because this is our role, we should not submit to things we

disagree with, even when these come from the elected government.

It is obvious that in the above extract Bill presents protest as a legal right and associates it with his perceived identity of non-passive members of the political community, who have the ability of critical thinking and acting to express their disagreement. Bill also highlights the role of protest as a form of resistance against government practices. The concept of resistance through collective action has been dominant in the Greek political discourse, especially after the implementation of austerity measures (Douzinas, 2013; Arampatzi, 2016), and is a crucial element of ideological load in understanding the representation of protest as a necessary tool in the political struggle. The issue of the democratic citizenship, the right and obligation of citizens to maintain an active political engagement in both the mainstream as well as the non-conventional political expression was a recurrent theme in focus groups and a core element of how these young people embodied the identity of active citizenship as part of their personal identity. For most participants protest was described as a tool of negotiation between the society and the elected authorities in the context of active political participation.

Extract 2

Coordinator: You mentioned that protests are a 'civil duty'. Could you explain why you think so?

John (FG2): After all these years of economic crisis, after all these things that have happened in our country- crisis, referenda, refugees, fascists – you cannot stay passive. Can you imagine how much worse things could be during all these years if people didn't go to the streets to protest against all these things? We are citizens every day, not just once every four years. We must regain our right to be heard, and this can't be done without our engagement, without being ready to take to the streets and re-negotiate anything they take for granted.

John's words in extract 2 also summarize his perception of collective action as a central aspect of young Greeks' political identity. For the active citizen, collective action is a tool of to express political demands to the government – which in most cases is referred to as 'they' or 'them', indicative of the lack of trust towards the political system, and lack of identification with the political authorities. John also presents protest as the only means to reaffirm his active role as a citizen and become involved with the conflicting environment of social change, at a time when the direct political participation of young people has returned to the political spotlight of Greece. As John brings in images of the turbulent political life

in Greece during the 2010s, protest is reinterpreted ('we must regain our right to be heard' – 'renegotiate anything they take as granted') in the discourse of young Greeks – not as a questionable form of action within a traditional social movements, but as a space of everyday participation which offers a purposeful negotiation tactic for social change. This reinterpretation of protest carries also an ideologically loaded transition from old movements (protests traditionally coordinated by political parties) to new social movements (in which collective action is characterized by diffused agency and the activation of solidarity networks) (Karyotis & Rudig, 2017; Vogiatzoglou, 2017).

Public Protests as Politicized Forms of Civic Participation

Although protests are usually defined as unconventional forms of political participation, a recurring theme seen in focus groups was the organized character of protests. Many participants expressed the view that organization and coherence of the participants' standpoint and politicized character of protest events was a critical element of how they want protests to be, and also a factor critical in choosing whether or not to support one.

Extract 3

Coordinator: Could you describe how you remember the protests you have either participated in or heard of?

Thalia (FG5): I would say that I remember the rallies and protests (I participated in) as something positive, because I felt that a group of people with collective spirit was claiming something, they had a goal, certain demands, in a calm, organized way and without fuss.

Alex (FG5): The first thing that comes to my mind when I hear of well-organized, well-protected and purposeful protests and demonstrations is a feeling that they really focus on their aims, and it makes me feel comfortable to listen to them and consider my position towards their claims.

Extract 3 is taken from a discussion between two participants with different protest experience on the factors that affect individual attitudes towards protests. The element of organization was associated with a positive image for the protest event and the protest group for both Thalia and Alex. Organized collective action reduced fear, enhanced the feeling of collectivity and was more readily perceived as determined, purposeful and peaceful by participants with no protest experience, like Alex. Thalia who had participated in protests, in recounting her experience also emphasizes the 'positive' feelings, the 'collective spirit', the common goals, and the organized,

peaceful character of the public protest. This type of public protest representation as an organized form of direct and active political participation with rational and positive characteristics, such as solidarity, dynamism, personal expression, sense of optimism and achievability of group goals, is expressed across all focus groups. The persistent effort of the participants to redefine the ideological content of protest in a new frame of action repertoires and strategies indicates their need to distance themselves from the dominant view of the conservative political spectrum in Greece (political parties, institutions and mainstream media) which has systematically used the element of protest violence 'in order to promote a law and order versus anarchy discourse' (Vogiatzoglou, 2017: 107). It seems that the representation of protest as a necessary form of social expression also includes the image of protesters as participants in organized activities with defined goals and tactics which, as stated by della Porta and Diani (2006: 28) is 'no longer restricted to radical sectors, but rather an option, open to a much broader range of actors'. The latter was a factor which was critical in evaluating the protests as less threatening and easier to identify with, as Alex states that 'it makes me feel comfortable to listen to them and consider my position towards their claims'.

Extract 4

Coordinator: So, can we say that there is the 'ideal protest'? If yes, how would you describe it?

Jenny (FG1): I believe that in an ideal demonstration, I need to get the feeling that all the participants are solid as a rock and determined.

Kelly (FG1): It is also important for me that there should always be 2-3 people who know exactly what to do and how to organize the others... so that we do not deviate from the aims of the protest demonstration.

Sophie (FG1): I don't fully agree with the logic of protests, but it's true. Well-organized protest events leave no room for misinterpretations for their intentions and are more appealing to people who may agree with the protest groups.

The above extract focuses on the essential element of dynamism in protests; Jenny and Kelly imply that the peaceful character of public protests should not undermine the organization and the dynamism of the event, as an expression of the power and the commitment to the goal of the participants. Discussing about their view on protests, they also describe their representation of an 'ideal protest' by focusing on their structure, form and organization. The peaceful but also determined

character of the collective action is placed at the center of the representation of protest as a celebration of people's will, focusing on the uniformity of participants both in ideology and in appearance, representing their collective identity and their common goals. In focus groups, organized collective action reflected the commitment and the determination of the engaged group. This aspect of collective action amplifies the dynamism of the event and implies the protest group's determination.

'PROTEST VIOLENCE: ORGANIZED CONFLICT OR CHAOS?' – PROTEST VIOLENCE ICONOGRAPHY

The second theme emerging from the focus groups was that of violence in protests, represented either as an organized battle or as an irrational chaos. In all focus groups, violence was portrayed as erupting mainly due to the organized action of 'riotous armies' of mindless hooligans who appear either as deviant protesters or intruders in peaceful demonstrations. In several cases, the description of the rioters responsible for the violent turn demonstrations can take was identified with the action of 'bahalakides' – a Greek slang term that describes a subgroup of the rioters – the 'hooded men' and the 'known strangers'.

Protest as an Occasion for Organized Conflict

When talking about their views on public protest, participants in focus groups repeatedly used a contrasting dipole: the idealistic representation of protests as violent. Violent protests were presented as the flipside of the idealistic representation of protests as an organized form of peaceful political claims, the version of reality (or what happens in most cases) versus what should happen, in an antithetic schema of idealization versus pragmatism.

Extract 7

Coordinator: What is, according to you, the aspect that deters you the most from participating in a protest?

John (FG2): Organized protests with en masse participation have great power, however, such is the nature of these protests that they can easily be manipulated and result in violence, which is then magnified by the Media, and finally what we see is just the violence caused by some hellraisers.... But it is difficult to limit this phenomenon, especially if protests have such an open character, I mean anyone can intrude in a protest and use it, as a pretext to serve their own goals.

Valia (FG2): You can never know who is next to you in a rally or a protest. I don't mean those who are protesting but those who may intrude to

create riots and start clashes that will be violently suppressed. I really don't know who these people are, I believe that they do not even care about the protest, they just want to fight against the cops or the State...

Chris (FG2): To me, the possibility of being trapped like civilians in a battlefield between two fighting opponents is what frightens me the most. Sometimes I think that rioters are paid people, they have a plan to get out of the crowd and make a mess with the police, so that the News can spoil the image of the demonstrators and make someone who watch what happens from their home have negative attitudes towards their participation.

Like John in Extract 2, almost all participants condemned the use of violence in public protests. The perceived positive aspects of public protest were contrasted by the negative perceptions and feelings caused by intruding violence. John starts talking about the power of protests as a tool of political and social change which, alas, has an inherent problem: the possibility of violence. John expresses his disapproval of violence and attributes it to actors with unknown motives, sometimes presented as *agent provocateurs* that do not identify with the goals of the protests and use them as an opportunity to confront their political or ideological enemies; the same viewpoint is echoed in Valia's statement 'they do not even care about the protest, they just want to fight against the cops or the State', which is a finding emphasized in previous studies too (Leontidou, 2012; Theodossopoulos, 2013). As della Porta and Diani (2006) observe, the most radical action in organized protests is often a strategic choice of protest leaders to achieve internal goals, such as forging a collective identity of the participants or developing solidarity bonds (Rochon, 1998). In this extract we see that, according to participants, such choices run the risk of alienating the external audience due to the unconventional, dynamic and often controversial nature of the selected actions, which on many occasions are out of control. As Chris highlights, protest violence is frequently perceived as the most frightening aspect of protests, due to the lack of control over the situation and an expressed feeling of being 'trapped, like civilians in a battlefield, between two fighting opponents', which contradicts the image of idealized protest and is mostly attributed to intruders with goals far different from those of the protesters.

At the same time, in many cases participants also described these violent clashes as a 'war', an organized engagement between the police and specific protest groups, which is illustrated with all aspects of a combat: duration, area and force commitment.

Extract 8

Coordinator: So, how do you think that violence erupts in protest events?

Maya (FG3): In some cases, you can tell that protests will be violent, for example the Commemoration day for the Athens Polytechnic uprising. When this day comes, we as students know that there will be clashes... All university schools in the city center and near Exarchia close precautionarily... Then, when anarchists take advantage of this occasion and throw Molotov cocktails at a protest, then really the situation resembles a state of warfare. To me this makes these areas dangerous and off-limits to peaceful demonstrators and even passers-by.

Bill (FG3): How can you tell this? Have you ever been in a protest on these specific dates? 'm sure you have never been. Because if you had ever been, you would have seen that no protester comes with the intention to harm anyone. They may be angry but they are do not want to fight, unless provoked. Protests are situations in which the state is faced with an organized and determined group of people who want to fight for their claims. But violence is an undesirable turn, not the main purpose of protests. I believe that what you say is inaccurate and driven by media propaganda.

Maya (FG3): It's not propaganda. We all know that some political forces use protests as a pretext to attack their ideological or physical opponents, the state or the cops.

The center of Athens, and especially the neighborhood of Exarchia (a well-known Athens neighborhood considered to be the host area for many social movements, squats and anarchist collectives) was mentioned several times. Participants with self-reported minimal protest experience and more conservative political views, such as Maya, described the Athens city center and Exarchia as the main battlefield of violent protests in Greece, an area which becomes 'dangerous or off-limits to peaceful demonstrators and even passers-by' on specific dates such as the 6th of December (commemoration day of the assassination of 15-year old student Grigoropoulos) or the 17th of November (commemoration day of the 1973 student uprising in Polytechnic School). This was an area of contention among Maya and Bill, as the latter, who claimed to have joined protest events in the past and to be more active in collective action participation, did not share this iconography of protest warzones and found it 'inaccurate and driven by media propaganda'.

In this case, the political ideology and protest experience of Maya and Bill led them to different explanations of protest violence. However, as the short account of Modern Greek political history indicates, this is not just a contradiction merely based on participants' personal experience and beliefs but rather reflects the ideological conflict between right and left political forces concerning the responsibility for the protest violence in post-1974 Greece – a conflict that has been revived since 2008 Athens riots.

Maya, with no protest experience, speaks on behalf of peaceful citizens and sees participants as belonging to organized armed forces, mainly identifying with anarchist organizations and leftist parties, and protests as occasions to fight against the police and the state. Maya's image of protest echoes the conservative discourse on this topic which focuses on condemning the use of protests by leftist groups as a pretext for an organized attack towards anything they perceive as enemies, mainly symbols of power authorities and can be attributed to the alienation of young people from the old-movement tactics of party-driven protest groups (Karyotis & Rudig, 2017), especially after the 2010 anti-austerity protests as well as with the polarized 2015 bailout referendum protest events.

On the other hand, Bill, who has significant protest experience and liberal political views, claims that the main purpose of the protesters is not the conflict, despite the organized, dynamic and massive character of protests, and implies that violence is caused by the attitude of other stakeholders involved in protest events, such as the police. Bill considers violence as a side-effect of the dynamic character and organized structure of protests, not a tactical choice, and implies that it is caused by the authorities' intransigent attitude. The view of the police as a central factor in mobilizing violent protests has been highlighted in previous research (Jeffery & Tufail, 2015; Xenakis, 2012). Xenakis (2012) identifies the uncontrollable aggression and violence of the police protest forces (MAT) as one of the causes that strengthened civil disobedience during the large anti-memorandum demonstrations in Athens in the period 2010–2012, a finding that is confirmed in research by Veneti et al. (2018) on the influence of the emerging ideology of photojournalists on the choice of covering practices in the demonstrations of that period. Similarly in their research Jeffery and Tufail (2015) emphasize that the aggressive attitude and 'demonstration of power' by the police forces, was a key motivation for mobilizing people from different areas during the riots and clashes between protesters and police in London in 2011 Bill recognized the role of the police in provoking an 'electrified' climate during demonstrations that favors violent demonstrations on the occasion of the very presence of the police as a symbol of repression and oppression. In this light, violence against the police is

not considered as 'blind violence' but as a counterattack against a symbol of a state of oppression that is growing in everyday life of individuals, in combination with other factors such as relative deprivation and perceived injustice (Jeffery & Tufail, 2015). This is an ideological position that perceives social violence as the result of a tug-of-war of opposing forces in the field of social conflict and places in this equation the factor of policing and police repression practices.

However, we find that this diametrically antithetical representation of protest violence has a common point of reference: in both Bill and Maya's quotes, protest violence is explained as grounded on the dynamics of contentious politics, while the tactical choice made by social movements to use protests as a battlefield between organized protest groups and authorities is condemned.

Protest Violence as Chaos

It is interesting that the theme of violence in protests was unanimously brought up by all focus groups as both battle and chaos. In the following excerpts, participants identify 'chaos', 'riots', 'anger', and 'fights' as the main elements that contribute to protest violence, when asked to comment on the circumstances under which violent incidents and riots take place in protests.

Extract 9

Coordinator: How do you think violence erupts in protest events? Who or what is responsible for this situation?

Nick (FG4): I believe that the protests are an opportunity for people to let off steam.

Helen (FG4): ...It is easy for someone who initially did not intend to act in such a way or cause 'bahalo',³ when they are in the heat of anger, to fight and all that we see every day in protests.

Adriana (FG4): ...I believe that this state of mind does not correspond to any logical actions, it is as if you go to the match and because everyone else is shouting, you become a fanatic and you start shouting too.

Stella (FG4): ...Yeah, I think that in this climate of bahalo and chaos it is very easy for anyone to deviate...

In this extract, participants framed violence as chaos in protests by focusing on the wild nature of clashes between the police and protesters, ending up in uncontrollable riots. These clashes between young, outraged rioters and the police were described by Nick and Helen as non-organized, emotion-fueled actions, which are caused

by rampant intruders and in most cases do not reflect the real aims and character of the protest. Adriana and Stella both used the Greek slang word 'bahalo' (μπάχαλο) to describe these clashes, a word that can be roughly translated as 'hellraising/riot' or 'havoc' (Leontidou, 2012) and emphasizes the rampant chaos caused by protesters who do not share or even understand the aim of the protest, but are there merely to thrive in the chaos and vandalisms. It should be noted that framing young hooded rioters as 'hellraisers' (bahalakides) has been used extensively after the fall of the Junta in Greece (1974), and more specifically after the riots of December 2008 in Athens, by the conservative and neo-liberal political agenda to justify state control over public gatherings and protests as well as law enforcement by the police. It is exactly this element of chaos and rage coupled with the absence of a direct explanation for the political motives behind violent clashes and vandalisms that causes Adriana, Stella and Helen to describe them as spontaneous actions, that they attribute to mob psychology.

Extract 10

Coordinator: Why do you think they do this?
[create chaos]

Maya (FG3): I don't think that these hooligans have any political or ideological affiliation. I don't even think they understand anything about the real aims of the demonstrations or the protests. They are just either common criminals or youngsters thrilled by the images of chaos and destruction and see it as a chance for a violent outburst of their suppressed emotions.

On the other hand, Maya's image of protest violence emphasizes the psychologization of the phenomenon, which is presented as an outcome of mob psychology or individual motives, and understood as a product of lawlessness, with protesters described as 'hooligans' and 'common criminals'. This perception of attributing protest violence to the action of rioters of unknown intentions and motives, defines the Discourse of Power towards protest, which is also embodied in young people's social representation of protest. Representing protests as deviating chaos also has ideological connotations, because it implies that collective action is perceived in a depoliticized ideological context, thus removing one of its core constituents not only because it transforms grievances into political action but also because it redefines conflict as the central element in achieving the social demands of groups. By emphasizing the rampant character of riots in protest representations, violence is not seen as a necessary strategy of social movements but either as a pretext for law-breaking or a result of the accumulated anger of the participants. The focus on

violence as criminal action and social deviation highlights the importance of maintaining order for the benefit of society and the individual, while it is used to indicate appropriate ways of protest and emphasizes the need to restore order to all those who deviate (Pechtelidis, 2011).

DISCUSSION – CONCLUSION

The present paper aims to describe the content of social representations of young Greeks towards protest, while examining the emerging identities that shape the structure of the representation, the two-way relationship between protest representation and ideology, as well as its function in the Greek social landscape. Analyzing the main characteristics in the representations of protest shared by young Greeks, it can be observed that the social object of the protest is perceived on the basis of a dipole: as a necessary function for the democratization of society and the promotion of social demands on the one hand, and as an area of conflicts that promotes fear and alienates young people from such collective actions on the other. The antithesis between social protests as radical and protests as peaceful and democratic actions lie in the heart of the social representations young Greeks hold about protest; this defines the structure of representation and reflects a deeply political as well as ideological conflict, rooted in the culture of protest of Greece, between the radical and the conservative ends of the political spectrum. However, our findings are aligned to Rudig and Karyotis' (2013: 532) conclusion that the post-2008 austerity crisis in Greece has created the socio-political conditions for a 'generation of protest opportunities, which trigger the latent protest socialization of a broader public that is not strongly defined ideologically in left-right term'. The social representations that young people in Greece have with regards to social protests, as reflected in the discussions of the focus groups, are not just a mere record of the commonest perceptions on this topic. They are also a reflection of how this commonly perceived reality is constructed by themselves, with what ideological components and with what ideological load. As Howarth (2006) points out, social representations are a specific type of symbolic form, through which the researcher can observe implicit power/contentious relations by detecting the boundaries within which social reality is composed.

Our analysis showed that the representations of protest held by young Greeks, as discussed in focus groups, refer to a social object that is not static, triggers core ideological beliefs held by the participants and draws its significance from the socio-political and historical background and the present context of Greek society. The representation of protests is conceptualized on the basis of dialectical antitheses and contradictory identities: the idealistic perception of public protest

is grounded on the conceptualization of the identity of active citizenship, while the violent side of protests is grounded upon the identity of rioters. We argue that it is both the structure and the function of the protest representation that determines its antithetical conceptualization (Wagner et al., 2000): the dialogical taxonomies of idealized protest versus protest violence and the emerging contradictory identities in protest representation constitute its main elements which determine its internal structure, as shown in Figure 1. The image of the ideal protest as well as that of protest violence lie in the heart of protest representation, as they are essential in defining the central notion of the protest's meaning, and in differentiating it from other collective actions; however, both these antithetical images are both shaped by common elements with different functions.

The concept of an ideal protest is a structural component of the representation of protest, the core field of how protest is conceptualized as a social object by participants on the basis of protests' internal organization, clear and coherent motives, collectivity and determination, political engagement and participation, as well as their ability to negotiate, respect and come to terms with opposing sides. On the other hand, the realization of protest events by protest actors are crucial in how the image of protest was shaped in real life and are closely associated with the roles of protest participants. We believe that the image of the ideal protest as civic engagement is the core element of protest representation, following Abric's and Tafari's (1995) taxonomy, as it defines the frame of protest conceptualization by the audience and its content, while

the image of protests as organized or chaotic conflict between protest actors constitutes the peripheral element of protest representation, which shapes the process of discussing and understanding the object of representation in real-world terms, and defines how the audience engage with the other actors.

The findings of the present study coincide with the findings of previous research (Baka & Garyfallou, 2011; Karyotis & Rudig, 2017; Pantelidou-Maloutas, 2015) which has studied political participation of young people in Greece, during the economic crisis, and especially after 2008. During this period the political interest of young people has been renewed and as a result young people 'intervene in the political process, contradicting the model of a non-politicized youth, dynamically participating both through modern channels and in an unmediated way' (Pantelidou-Maloutas, 2015: para. 18). Respectively, Karyotis and Rudig (2017) observe the transformation and evolution of young people's perception of political participation in Greece during 2010-2015, with key findings the overcoming of political and social alienation, the emphasis on interpersonal trust and interest in politics, their active participation, especially after 2012, in the formation of a social movement that resembles the characteristics of the new social movements and their involvement in collective actions. The image of the democratic subject seeking the realization of universal democratic ideas and direct civil representation/mediation to resolve social/political/economic issues through peaceful collective action that focuses on individual responsibility for common problems and contributes to common solutions was the one used

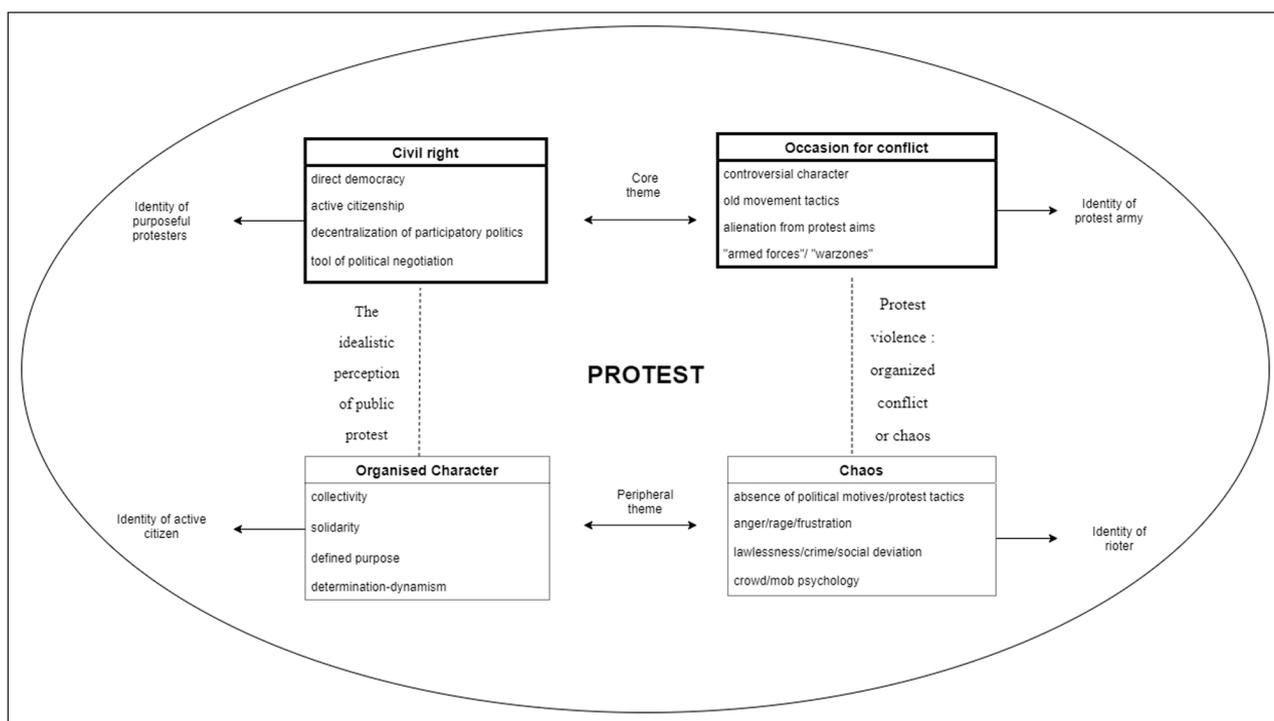


Figure 1 Schematic depiction of protest representation.

by the participants to describe either their personal experiences from collective action or the image of the 'ideal' demonstration/protest.

At the same time the dialectical structure of protest social representation has an ideological function as it expresses the way young Greeks try to discuss, negotiate, assimilate and redefine public protest under their set of beliefs and their worldview concerning social reality. This contrast between the image of ideal protest as a civil right of Democracy, with organized structure and peaceful character versus the image of protest violence either as a conflict or as an uncontrolled chaos unveils the way the young generation in Greece debate and try to define protest: the social object of protest is used as a means of reappropriation of political participation, within the Greek historical and socio-political context, but in new terms. Protest is represented by young Greeks as a form of unmediated political participation, but without its radical character. The identity of active citizen incorporates the ideological notion of subjects' political involvement through more direct processes than the traditional ones (voting, party politics, etc.), but also less polarizing and more effective in negotiating social groups' political demands. Finally, the way in which the perceptions of young people about the Power Authorities, which seek the suppression of demonstrations and the maintenance of the status quo, are embodied in their representation of protests gives us an idea of how young people perceive and how they ideologically position themselves towards the effect that existing power relations have on shaping their own behavior concerning political participation. The findings of the present study support Tsekoura's (2016) findings on the spaces of youth participation in Greece and England. As pointed out by Tsekoura (2016: 337) the concept of Power in young people's representations of political participation is constructed on the ideological notion of repression and presents the involvement of the Power in the field of political participation of young people, as a 'one-way process' with 'emphasis on predetermined actions'.

Obviously the present research is governed by certain limitations. In the focus groups, the topic to be discussed was the views of the participants on the concept of social protest and demonstrations, that is, a fairly broad topic, which could cover a wide range of sub-topics with rich content and needed a more extensive analysis compared to the scope of the present study. Our research and analysis focused on the general representational field of protest, as we examined on how the broad concept of the social object protest is ideologically shaped, negotiated and represented through focus groups discussions. We understand that protest representation is not a static object, which is conceived in the same way by everyone and our research methodology did not intend to point to a direction of individualistic 'cognitive reductionism' and 'lack of critical agenda' (Voelklein & Howarth, 2005); however,

the present study emphasized mainly the relationship between the representation of protest and ideological beliefs concerning civic engagement and political participation. We also acknowledge that people may frame and construct their representations differently when the social object is specific and discussed 'in practice' in specific rhetorical frameworks (Potter & Litton, 1985), rather than 'in theory'. Future studies on this topic could include the examination of the complex relationship between the content of the social representations of protest and broader issues concerning political ideological orientation such as attitudes towards problems of modern Greek society (e.g., immigration, nationalism, globalization, ecological crisis, etc.), political preferences, attitudes towards outgroups as well as system beliefs (system-justifying or system-rejecting tendencies – Jost et al., 2009).

In addition, the present study, interested in demonstrating the interactive relationship between the content of social representations and the concept of ideology, treats the latter in its abstract form or in other words chooses to focus on the symbolic aspect of ideology (Popp & Rudolph, 2011). Thus we examined ideology at its symbolic level as an ideological self-categorization and rather than at its functional aspect, in the sense of the preference of political practices. The present analysis of young Greeks' social representations for protest emphasizes the influence of social factors which provide the context for the interpretation of participants' ideological characterizations and attitudes. In this sense, the symbolic aspect of ideology does not require a high level of political complexity, as ideological categorizations and the resulting political attitudes are based primarily on symbolic evaluations rather than on formulated and elaborated political preferences (Devine, 2015). A field of future research on this topic could also take into account and examine the functional aspect of ideology, studying the relationship between the way in which the social object of demonstrations is structured in the social group of young people and represented and their political behavior at the level of political choices and practices.

NOTES

- 1 In this paper, as well as in data collection, we use the term public protest to include as many types of collective action that include riots, demonstrations, protests or mass gatherings which engage nonconventional 'forms of influencing the political, social and cultural process' (della Porta & Diani, 2006), in order to promote or prevent changes in institutionalized power relations (Taylor & van Dyke, 2004), and are often chosen by social movements over other conventional forms of political participation, such as leaflet distribution, boycott participation, and signature collection.
- 2 In our analysis we use the term 'identity' beyond its cognitive content and we refer mostly to the personified content of ideological forms, as the reflective entity of self-categorization and social comparison (Turner et al., 1987) through the attribution of characteristics to the roles of public protests' different actors.
- 3 [Translation note: *bahalo* (Greek: *μάχαλο*): riots].

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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