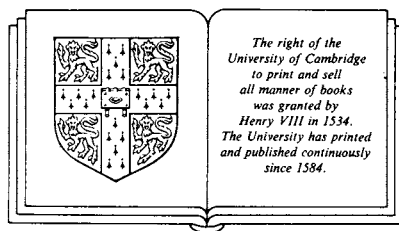


The Mediterranean city in transition

*Social change
and urban development*

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Introduction

At the crossroads of three worlds – capitalist core, periphery and socialist Europe – Greece will surprise the historian with its antinomies, contradictions and abrupt transitions, when its history is finally recorded. I do not mean the familiar history of political events, the State or the dominant classes, which amount to the same thing; but that of the urban subordinate classes, which continue to be underestimated as an object for research. Most of the issues discussed in this book are unrecorded in Greek historiography; the population constituting its focus has remained hidden; and the period of popular spontaneity and creativity has passed irretrievably, leaving a gap in research, which contrasts with its lasting imprint on the structure of Greater Athens (the capital of Greece), Salonica, and other Greek cities.

Important differences among the three broad geo-political regions in Europe are revealed through socio-geographical analysis. Leaving aside the socialist countries, the contrast between North and South will be stressed here. There is a delicate point which renders Greece a crucial case study in such a project. As the country belongs to the eastern of Braudel's (1966) 'two Mediterraneans', it has been deprived of autonomous development during medieval times, and continuity has been interrupted in its history by Ottoman occupation. 'To claim that the considerable obstacles between the two halves of the Mediterranean effectively separate them from each other would be to profess a form of geographical determinism, extreme, but not altogether mistaken' (Braudel 1966: 134). The cleavage between the Ottoman and the Spanish Empires intensified in the sixteenth century, but gradually lessened from the nineteenth century. Unlike its Southern European neighbours who have in the past, as core societies, colonized the Third World, Greece has been in many ways close to peripheries: a long period of its modern history was spent under Ottoman rule, and then under British and US neocolonial domination. In the postwar period, as it passed from peripheral to semiperipheral status in the world economy, however, it became more like the rest of the Mediterranean societies, and developed certain important differences from Northern Europe. Interdependent development of these societies is reflected especially in the massive postwar

waves of emigration to the North, and in urban development patterns. It is on the latter that this book focuses.

Cities of the North, mostly cold and disciplined, contrast with the light, heat and spontaneity of Southern cities and the corresponding popular attitudes. Mediterranean labouring people have their own ways of opposing capitalism and confronting poverty and exploitation. They travel, escape from the countryside and invade the cities, emigrate, then return, and somehow they manage to survive in dignity. Their internationalism long before the present century was stressed by Braudel (1966: 312): 'There was proverbially and probably literally a Florentine in every corner of the world.' Poverty does not prevent the Mediterranean labouring people from becoming creative in their everyday lives. Spontaneous alternative cultures have usually been ignored until they culminated in political strife, *coups d'état* and political passivity but also civil wars. Some of their everyday manifestations like informality, community life and socializing, song and football attendance, or mutual aid and illegal building, meet the indifference and scorn of marxists, even the CPs of their own countries, and are taken advantage of by the State. Creativity and spontaneity thus oscillate on the verge between opposition and cooptation.

The familiar theories of Marx and Engels, especially of the latter, on the relationship of social classes with the city and urban growth often seem irrelevant within Mediterranean histories. Despite their internationalism, the seers of the labour movement reinforced 'the deeply entrenched tendency to read history from the vantage-point of the West' (Giddens 1981: 3). After all, productivism and economism have been devised on the basis of Northern experience. For the cities of the South, the relevant intellectual is Gramsci. It is not coincidental that he stressed reproduction alongside production, politics and ideology, civil society and the State rather than economics, regional consciousness alongside trade unionism, popular spontaneity along with the Party; or that, while in prison, he chose to refer to marxism cryptically as 'the philosophy of praxis' (Hoare and Smith 1971) rather than 'historical materialism'. The paramount importance of human agency and struggles was obviously derived from his own experience in interwar Italy.

Contemporary historical research has accepted that there has not been one unique model of transition from feudalism to capitalism. The multiplicity of forms, rates and ways of transition becomes especially evident in Southern Europe. In the Mediterranean, capitalism arrived with a different timing, but also with a different face, and encountered several specific forms of popular resistance as an everyday practice. The theory model proposed here has to be sensitive in these specificities, without

explaining them away as 'cultural particularities'. It has to venture generalizations *within* the Southern European context rather than fragment the Mediterranean experience in the eclectic manner to which positivist geography has accustomed us. We are not dealing with 'exceptions' to certain 'regularities' prescribed in Anglo-American geography. The model attempts a synthesis of some critical materialist aspects of contemporary marxist as well as ecological theory with Gramsci's contribution in the study of civil society, culture, subjectivity and spontaneity.

Despite their different historical backgrounds until the late nineteenth century, the countries of Southern Europe have shared certain geo-political and socio-economic characteristics and a level of economic development after the wars, which render them comparable. Italy (though the most developed), Spain, Portugal and Greece can be set against the rest of Europe *as a group* – Mediterranean or Southern Europe. The two descriptions will be used interchangeably. We are concerned with Braudel's (1966: 232) 'true' Mediterranean, delimited by the olive tree but not the palmgroves (Europe, not Africa; fig. 1.1), including Portugal, despite its Atlantic coast. The most striking similarities among Southern cities mostly stem from the coexistence of 'modernity' and informality (not 'tradition'), on many levels: as their class structure approaches the pattern of late capitalism, self-employment remains widespread; managers and executives coexist with artisans, shopkeepers and free labourers; in the location of economic activity, as CBDs are rebuilt with modern office blocks, mixed land uses predominate; in housing allocation, as modern apartment blocks spring up, self-built neighbourhoods continue to mushroom; in urban development, several private and public, customary and irregular (illegal or informal) strategies coexist and affect the systems of production and reproduction. A 'scheme of social polarity' such as Toennie's model of *Gemeinschaft/Gesellschaft*, as adopted by Allum (1973) for the study of Naples, is indeed appropriate. It contrasts a social formation based on feeling, personal relationships and the sharing of private lives, with one founded on interest, impersonal relationships and the sharing of external life (Allum 1973: 5).

The image of a 'developing world' evoked by Mediterranean Europe rests on such aspects of society, on urban morphology, and on the colonial and cultural associations with Latin America, as well as Africa, which have exerted reciprocal influences among urban cultures, as well as emigration, the reproduction of the informal economy, and socio-political aspects like the instability of parliamentarism and the experience of authoritarianism and military dictatorships (Giner 1984). Fascism swept Italy throughout the interwar period, and authoritarian rule lasted from then until the 1970s in

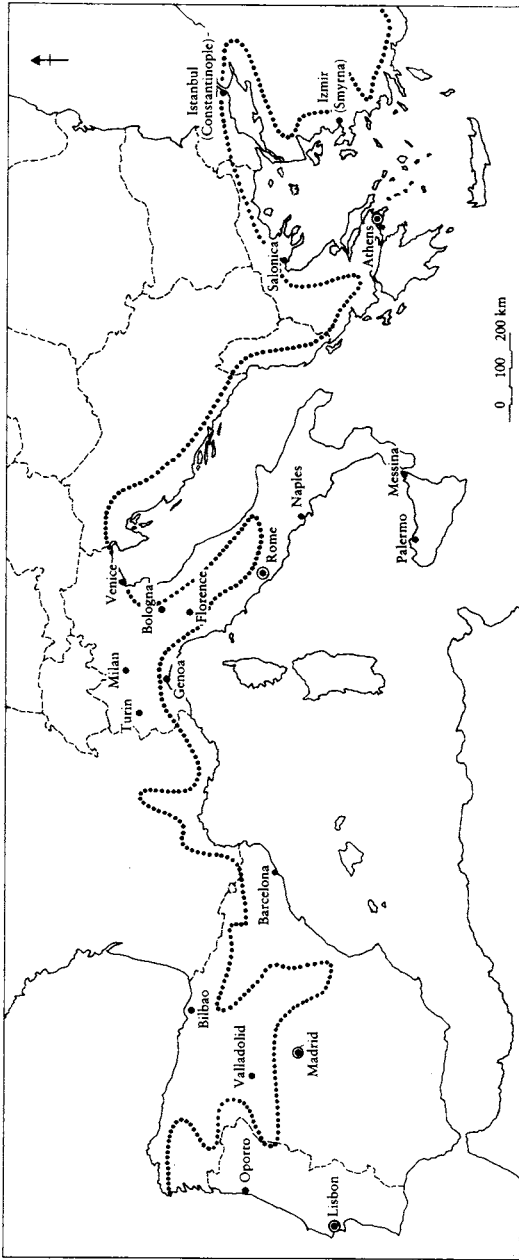


Figure 1.1 Braudel's 'true' Mediterranean and its important cities. Mediterranean Europe defined by the northern limits of the olive tree (dotted line, adapted from Braudel 1966 : 232), and large cities most frequently mentioned in the book.

the case of the Iberian countries, and with intervals of foreign occupation (1941–4), civil war (1946–9) and ‘restricted democracy’ (1949–67) in Greece (Diamandouros 1986: 549). European and non-European trajectories mingle in the latter’s urban history, and for a long period Athens has invited comparisons with the peripheral world (chapter 2).

Mediterranean urban histories have presented ‘a wealth of the most bizarre combinations’ (Gramsci 1971 edn: 200). With great insensitivity, however, urban phenomena which recur in Greece and all over the semiperipheral world are usually considered as residual, culturally specific, even traditional or ‘precapitalist’, destined to converge, sooner or later, with Western patterns. There are two themes against such views in this book: an effort to explain these diverging trajectories of urban development and restructuring in the course and logic of their own process of capitalist transformation; and a critique of the insensitivity of current social geography to the experience of the peripheral and semiperipheral world.

In the study of urban development, it is still believed that popular peripheral settlements belong to a residual mode of land colonization, which will inevitably be swept away with capitalist expansion. Like peripheral cities, Athens and Rome have sometimes been considered as ‘preindustrial’ (White 1984: 161) or ‘dual’. Arguments in favour of such an analysis have been well elaborated in Latin American and Asian studies. They include a view of internal migrants as peasants ‘ruralizing’ the cities (McGee 1971; essays in Hauser ed. 1961); the power of social, ethnic or religious groups to impose their ways of life on society at large (Berry and Rees 1969), and to create a ‘reverse equilibrium’ in urban growth (Alonso 1964); the practice of traditional subsistence agriculture on the urban fringe (Roberts 1978); the presence of populations marginal to capitalism. Views about ‘dualism’ have already been subject to doubt (Worsley 1984), despite the frequent occurrence of these phenomena in the poorer section of the peripheral world. The critique is justified.

Spontaneous urban development through popular land colonization has constituted a widespread, recurring phenomenon in cities which are basically capitalist. The theoretical question posed in this book concerns the relationships which create this pattern of urban development, and the exploration of the forces reproducing and undermining it. The central hypothesis is that spontaneous urban expansion is not a precapitalist remnant, nor a manifestation of residual peasant modes of land allocation. It has emerged with capitalist development and has been ‘functional’ to it – up to a point, at least, which will be specified historically and economically for the case of Greece. This issue can only be investigated through intensive research, where processes are observed to unfold in one city. The

paradigmatic case study is Athens, the capital of Greece. It is compared with the rest of the Mediterranean capitals on the basis of secondary material for the latter, but explanation of urban development relies on its own particular history. The questions posed require the exploration of processes of social and spatial change during transitional periods in this history, rather than urban 'structures' or 'patterns'.

The book thus focuses on crucial periods of transition. It spans the 1948–81 period of Greek urban history (with frequent references to the years before and after this), a period of rapid capitalist transformation especially under conservative (or even military) rule. In this broader period, one turning point which affected urban development patterns in a radical manner is investigated in depth. After the introduction of the theoretical framework, concepts and basic research hypotheses in the context of current urban theory and the schematic presentation of the uniqueness of Mediterranean cities (chapter 1), a first transition in the urban history of twentieth-century Athens is rediscovered and interpreted in chapter 2: the passage from working-class landlessness to popular land control and spontaneous urban development as capitalism rose to dominance in the interwar period. However, this first crucial decade of socio-spatial transformation, the 1920s, is not discussed at length, because it constitutes only a background for the examination of subsequent Greek urban development rather than a typical Mediterranean transition.

The focus of the book is on the second turning-point in the Greek urban history, the 1970s. Chapter 3 explores social transformation in the context of postwar economic development, by discussing the political economy of Greece within the Mediterranean region and the nature of urban social class structuration. The ways in which spontaneous urban development was reproduced in postwar Athens, the social geography of the city, and especially the role of the proletariat in urban land colonization, are studied in chapter 4. Trends of industrial and urban restructuring, however (chapter 5), along with State intervention, worked towards the erosion of popular control of peripheral urban land. This most recent transition, and the consequent urban restructuring, is presented and explained in chapter 6. The final chapter 7, which draws together the discussion of Greater Athens in the context of comparative urban theory, locates this city in a crucial position for the formulation of a more systematic approach to Mediterranean urban development and restructuring.