Scottish Geographical Journal

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rsgj20

Social justice and a city: surplus capital and the remaking of Athens

Ioanna Korfiati & Hamish Kallin

To cite this article: Ioanna Korfiati & Hamish Kallin (2023) Social justice and a city: surplus capital and the remaking of Athens, Scottish Geographical Journal, 139:3-4, 390-396, DOI: 10.1080/14702541.2023.2238676

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14702541.2023.2238676

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Published online: 21 Jul 2023.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 529

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Citing articles: 1 View citing articles

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rsgj20

SCOTTISH GEOGRAPHICAL JOURNAL
2023, VOL. 139, NOS. 3–4, 390–396
https://doi.org/10.1080/14702541.2023.2238676

Social justice and a city: surplus capital and the remaking of Athens

Ioanna Korfiati[a] and Hamish Kallin[b]

[a]Institute of Advanced Studies in the Humanities, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; [b]Institute of Geography, School of Geosciences, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

ABSTRACT

Social Justice and the City (*SJTC*) is an artefact that epitomises a radical shift in the history of the discipline of Geography, and more broadly in urban theory; and it is also a signpost to what followed it, a book that raises the spectre of a more fleshed out theory of urban capital circulation than it actually contains. Yet the demands of *SJTC* – that we reject liberal orthodoxy and try to explain the systemic forces that shape our cities; that Marx is useful; that we should see the city, and space itself, as a manifestation of surplus capital on the move; that we should dare to believe all this can be overcome – present an invitation to think about the city in a way that still feels vital. In this short piece, we try to think about *SJTC* in relation to a specific city to which we feel a connection (the inner-city of Athens, which is currently undergoing violent, dramatic transformation), which highlights some of the ways in which it is outdated – and many of the ways in which it is not.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 19 June 2023
Accepted 17 July 2023

KEYWORDS
Social Justice and the City; Athens; surplus capital; rent; touristification; marxist geography

We were both born 15 years after *Social Justice and the City* (*SJTC*) was published. When we encountered it for the first time as undergraduates, it was already older than we are now. We read it in different places (Edinburgh and Thessaloniki) and on different degree programmes (Geography and Architecture). We both recall encountering it as a relic of sorts: inspiring, no doubt, but in sepia tones. First time around, we both skipped the first section. Perhaps our lecturers thought we would struggle with the often-impenetrable language of ‘Pareto optimality’, ‘individuations’, and ‘equilibriums’, or was that post-war liberal orthodoxy simply too unrecognisable by the late 2000s? When invited to revisit it for the purposes of this small intervention, we struggled.

Its influence means it feels familiar, full of what are now well-established and perhaps quite mundane propositions in geography and other spatial disciplines. It seems to fulfil two related but distinct functions. It is (i) an artefact that epitomises a radical shift in the history of the discipline of Geography, and more broadly in urban theory. In this guise, it

CONTACT Ioanna Korfiati io.pkorf@gmail.com The Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, University of Edinburgh, Hope Park Square, Edinburgh EH8 9NW

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

is primarily of interest to intellectual historians, or those who want to trace their roots. It is also (ii) a signpost to what followed it, a book that raises the spectre of a more fleshed out theory of urban capital circulation than it actually contains. It is, in this sense, a germinal text, where inspiring shifts appear in ways that feel rather raw, undigested, overgeneralised. The reading of Lefebvre is rushed, perhaps slightly competitive. The language is frequently didactic and hard to follow. The ghetto chapter spends longer focussed on Manchester than any actual ghettos, still less the folk who were confined to live in them. The formulations (of, for example, exchange value and use value in urban land markets) feel almost two dimensional compared to the way Harvey (1982) would himself develop them in *The Limits to Capital*. The concepts that would make his corpus of work on uneven geographical development so captivating – creative destruction, the spatial fix, the crises of capital, and so on – are not to be found in *SJTC*, except as ghostly outlines. But whilst we can quibble with its quirks (of style, structure, age, omission), we cannot deny that it represents an invitation to think about the city in a way that still feels vital. Put simply, the demands of *SJTC* – that we reject liberal orthodoxy and try to explain the systemic forces that shape our cities; that Marx is useful; that we should see the city, and space itself, as a manifestation of surplus capital on the move; that we should dare to believe all this can be overcome – are our demands too. In many ways, the Geography it helped to create is the terrain on which we were brought together as PhD students, friends, colleagues. It is the Geography we try to do.

One of the striking qualities of *SJTC* is the absence of any actually-existing city as its focus; Harvey (1973) is scathing about empiricism without theorisation. This presents an interesting paradox. We have no qualms about 'powerful patterns of thought' (p. 145) that reach beyond detail to synthesis and explanation, but only if they help us to explain cities we know. Thinking about *SJTC with* a specific city is therefore useful not as a corrective to the book's abstractions, but because it allows us to reflect on how they are or are not useful fifty years later. Athens is the city we have chosen to reflect on, for it is another ground on which our minds meet (one of us grew up there, and the other grew fond of the city over several years of fieldwork with students). Its inner city is being violently, dramatically transformed. When we started to try and link *this* city with 'the city' of *SJTC*, we got frustrated, returning to ideas that are prompted by the book but not actually in it, as if the text is continuously hinting at thoughts not-yet fully developed. But our frustration was slowly tempered by excitement, hardened by anger. Thinking about a place we feel a connection to re-animated the book, emphasising how its core message is still, sadly, so necessary. Rereading the classic, we find a signpost back to the future it helped to build.

Athens is a city of sharp distinctions (social, economic, cultural, and aesthetic). It is a city for which many plans were drafted, but few were completed. Its growth in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was powered by rapid waves of cumulative, often self-financed, minimally regulated development (Mantouvalou & Mpalla, 2004). Struggling through decades of dictatorship and war, its inner city emerged from the twentieth century as a place of widespread homeownership, fragmented investment, and a peculiar convergence of differing social and economic interests (Dellatsimas, 2004). Neoliberal visions of 'modernisation', entrepreneurialism, financialization and aggressive privatisation were spurred on first by the 2004 'Olympic dream' and – when all that unravelled – were imposed as systemic necessities once the 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC) began to bite (Kalatzopoulou & Mpelavilas, 2014).

Greece, and by extension its capital city, was caught between two contradictory geographies of crisis (Skoufoglou, 2013): (i) a geography of struggle for the distribution of destruction which, mobilising the discursive reconstruction of a 'New Southern Question' (Hadjimichalis, 2018), collectivised responsibility for the debt's causes (and therefore the obligation for its payout); and (ii) a geography of political alliances across the European Union (EU) which came up with a 'rescue' strategy – one that would allow for the usurpation of the creative fruits that destruction bears. As a stark (and still shocking) reminder of the centrality of land and property in the political economy of crisis, the third (out of four) Economic Adjustment Programme for Greece, signed in 2015, enforced (among a long, long list of other measures) the confiscation and liquidation of €50bn worth of national assets, to be transferred to an 'independent fund' operating 'under the supervision of the relevant European institutions' (European Commission, 2015) for fire sale. As Harvey (2011, p. 246) explains, devalued assets 'left over from bankruptcies and collapses can be bought up at fire-sale prices by those blessed with liquidity and profitably recycled back into circulation. Surplus capital thus finds a new and fertile terrain for renewed accumulation'. Athens's crisis made it an especially 'fertile terrain': by 2015, 'real estate assets had lost almost 40% of their value in relation to the precrisis levels' (Alexandri, 2022, p. 72). In this context, as Koutrolikou (2015) shows, the mixture of austerity, protest, and violence associated with the inner-city led media and politicians' discourse increasingly to distinguish certain neighbourhoods from 'normal' Greeks who were, by presumption, not immigrants, not anarchists, not protestors, and lived elsewhere. Redefining 'the public' vs. its enemies in this way galvanised a geography of fear that set the stage for emergency measures.

SJTC maintains the assumption that effective planning (and, perhaps implicitly, the agents and institutions behind it) seeks to alleviate social injustices across the city, providing solutions that 'are liberal in that they recognise inequity but seek to cure that inequity within an existing set of social mechanisms' (Harvey, 1973, p. 136). Such planning is 'doomed to failure' (p. 110) in a capitalist society – but this is an anachronism, because you cannot fail at something you do not try to do. The liberal progressivism of *SJTC*'s first half is a stranger to contemporary Athens, in stark contrast to the aggressive, often punitive, aims (and subsequent actions) of planning, where alleviating the social injustices of the market has become alleviating anything that stands in its way. This may sound like neoliberalism 101 (Harvey, 2005), but the 'liberalism' is in especially short supply. The normalisation of the *necessity* of inward investment (particularly focused on tourism) as the only possible (and therefore inevitable) pathway out of economic hardship goes hand-in-hand with an increasingly authoritarian 'cleaning up' of the inner city, the spreading of anti-immigration rhetoric, much tighter controls on public space, and the fierce suppression of enduring resistance and emergent 'urban solidarity spaces' (Arampatzi, 2017). Since their election in 2019, New Democracy, the Greek 'liberal-conservative' party, has rushed to 'deal with' Exarcheia – an emblematic district of the inner-city with a long history of grassroots radicalism and a rich creative culture of resistance and solidarity – dismissed in the words of the Prime Minister himself as 'a den of lawlessness, thugs, and drug trafficking' (Ta Nea, 2019). Less than half a kilometre to the northeast, Strefi Hill, a green public place where assemblies meet, cultural events take place, people sleep, children play, dogs walk, and views of the city are great, is also facing 'redevelopment'. There is a pincer movement at play here, with the 'platform capitalism'

of Airbnb hollowing out the community quietly whilst the riot cops invade the public realm. The two conjoin through the commodification of resistance itself (Pettas et al., 2022), sharply reflecting Neil Smith's (1996) idea of a *revanchist* urbanism – the class retaking of space, where culture-war meets profit margins. The police guard the construction of a highly contested metro station that will take over Exarcheia Square; repression fuses with infrastructure, and each claims space for capital (Vradis, 2022).

Elsewhere in the city, an ambitious plan flagrantly aims to extend the average stay of tourists and expand the spatial range of their curiosity (and spending). Several working-class neighbourhoods northwest of the city centre face violent transformation, having withstood decades of disinvestment (and the neglected infrastructure, services, and public realm that comes with it). The construction of a new Archaeological Museum on part of Plato's Academy Park will take what has been, for generations, an unassuming green space used by locals, and turn it into 'a place of destination and development' (*Greek City Times*, 2021). The longer-term vision aims to link it with the Acropolis (the nation's most visited attraction) through the curation of a pedestrian route that will no doubt set a fire under real estate values, speculation, and displacement either side of it. In a similar vein, the mutli-million budget 'Great Walk of Athens' (a shelved plan refuelled during the coronavirus pandemic in the name of making the city centre 'people-friendly' and whose pilot phase in 2020 failed spectacularly) envisions a pedestrian network circling the Acropolis, linking cultural and historical sites and replacing vitally important traffic arteries of the city (such as Panepistimiou and Vasilissis Olgas Avenues) with tree-lined 'boulevards', museumifying and commercialising everything along the way. As Harvey (1973, p. 112) suggests, capital 'clearly will flow in a way which bears little relationship to need or to the condition of the least disadvantaged territory. The result will be the creation of localized pockets of high unfulfilled need'.

Tourist numbers have climbed dramatically in recent years (in 2022, the Greek tourist ministry celebrated the country's rise to the third most visited place in the world, and most of those visitors arrive into Athens). Visitors to the city itself are also on the rise – up from 2.6 million in 2013 to 5.9 million just pre-pandemic, projected to rise to almost 8 million by 2030 according to a recent report from the Greek Tourism Confederation (Krinis, 2022), although this is as much an aim as a projection. The resultant pressure on the use of space is intense. Public parks are becoming ticketed attractions; hotel chains are expanding; homes are divided into short-let rooms; rooftops are turned into bars (claiming every bit of hope for quiet escape); entire *polykatoikies* (the concrete blocks of flats that make up most of the city) are eagerly snapped up by investors who sometimes have never set foot in the city. If they invest enough, however, they are *free* to come and stay as long as they want, following their own capital. In stark indication of the state's desperate need for international investment (*any* investment) and the hypocrisy of its anti-immigrant rhetoric, the Golden Visa 'citizenship by investment' programme handed out Greek (and thus EU) citizenship in exchange for just €250,000 worth of property investment. As of 2022, 28,767 such permits had been granted, equating to some €2.6 billion of real estate investment (Get Golden Visa, 2023).[1] Tourism-led investment is greeted as saviour to an austerity-stricken city: 'if rent cannot be extracted by one means then it will be by another' (Harvey, 1973, p. 191).

Average rents across the city have risen sharply – up by 50% between 2017 and 2020 (Kafetzis, 2022) – often displacing lifelong residents, forcibly turning them into nomads

in their own city. This might seem paradoxical in a country with 'one of the highest rates of vacant houses in Europe, with most of them being concentrated in large urban centres', where the vacancy rate for housing in Athens stood at 31% in 2011 (Balampanidis et al., 2022). But scarcity *cannot* disappear, *SJTC* contends, as it is the direct outcome of *and* a necessary condition for the sustained prominence of the rental market. Hence the explosive growth of short term lets (STLs), most conspicuously Airbnb, which plays a wider structural role in remaking the urban housing market: alongside the police presence, it reasserts the rule of rent through scarcity, enacting accumulation by dispossession on a wide scale. As Gourzis et al. (2019) point out, it is not just that STL numbers have risen dramatically – up over 300% 2015–2018 – but the geography of growth is uneven. Once the central city districts were saturated, the frontier of profitability expanded outwards, e.g. to Plateia Attikis, a 'peripheral, not expensive neighbourhood' (p. 205), where Airbnb listings increased by *542%* over the same period. The correlation between rising STL numbers and rising rents across the housing market is strong; so too is the relation to gentrification-like processes, mirroring trends observed in the touristification/gentrification debates elsewhere (Jover & Diaz-Parra, 2020). The emergence of 'Medium Term Lets' (mainly aimed at remotely working, often currency-strong digital nomads) are also increasingly noticeable, exacerbating 'class replacement' (Pettas et al., 2022). An inner-city that was, until very recently, made up of diverse mixed used neighbourhoods, is everywhere transformed into instagrammable spots for consumerism. You buy the authentic experience of a place that was not there six months ago. When entire *polykatoikies* are converted to STLs from head-to-toe – capitalising on even the least attractive lower floors – this leads to the concentration of properties in fewer hands, eroding the historical dominance of the fragmented, socially diffused, 'horizontal' homeownership model of the city, which had posed a significant barrier to past attempts at inner-city gentrification (Balampanidis et al., 2021). As Harvey (1973, p. 190) notes, 'rent can dictate use', which may seem like a simple observation, but it is one that is profoundly remaking the city.

In her characteristically brilliant review of *SJTC* when it first came out, Doreen Massey (1974) pays particular attention to the distinctions that Harvey sets up between 'revolutionary', 'status quo' and 'counter-revolutionary' theory, and the specific relation to reality and *practice* that Harvey uses to make these distinctions. In some senses, the weirdest aspect of *SJTC* is the invisibility of those who would *do* practice, whatever practice is. The book conveys no sense of class (in the sense of antagonism or organisation). There are no people, and therefore (despite all the talk of inequality, wealth, decision-making) no real sense of power, agency, or struggle. This is, to a certain degree, perhaps necessary for a book which dares to build theory. But if 'revolutions in thoughts cannot ultimately be divorced from revolutions in practice' (Harvey, 1973, p. 127), it is all the more striking that 'practice' has a shadow-like quality throughout the book. It feels irrelevant, completely overtaken by theory. In Athens, that does not fly.

If Athens is a city of sharp distinctions, then none is sharper than brutal class reshaping of its urban landscape on the one hand and fierce, enduring resistance on the other. Its centre is highly politicised, and (some of) its people stubbornly refuse to submit to what presents itself as the city's (and their) inevitable fate. They refuse not to show up when riot police and metres-high fences appear overnight, to defend public spaces turned construction sites; they form assemblies; seek connections and build solidarity

across the city; file appeals against 'redevelopments' even if it feels beyond hope; they struggle to block home repossessions even if they are done online. There can be no social justice without them.

When invited to think about *SJTC*, we did not imagine it would be, at times (and in all honesty), a bit of an uninspiring read. Harvey's *oeuvre* has so many recurring motifs, so it is difficult not to read this as a first draft; difficult for us at least, who approach it in time from a point when we have already read so much that it inspired. *SJTC* does not give us the mesmerising theory of capital circulation and its uneven geographies that Harvey and others would later develop, but it identifies perhaps *the* fundamental lesson of Marxist geography: that capitalist urbanisation is inextricably linked to the shifting needs of surplus capital. The book possesses the peculiar quality of simultaneously feeling hopelessly outdated and depressingly relevant. It provides us with the building blocks of a radical method to think about (and challenge) the capitalist city: this method has become *our* method, and there is no doubt that it has been monumentally important for a whole generation of radical geographers or geographers radicalised.

Trying to reflect on the book in relation to Athens (admittedly in a slightly sweeping fashion), we found ourselves grieving for the city, its fate intimately tied to the persistent truth of the book's theories. But thinking about a city we care about activated our reflection of the book in a whole new way: its boldness and optimism are necessary. Ultimately, no matter how dated *SJTC* is, it is not as dated as we *wish* it was.

Note

1. In May 2023, the threshold for the Greek Golden Visa programme was raised to €500,000.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank Alkisti Prepi and Yorgos Michailidis for their warmth and generosity; the editors for the invitation, feedback, and encouragement; and each other, for the common ground.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

Alexandri, G. (2022). Housing financialisation a la Griega. *Geoforum; Journal of Physical, Human, and Regional Geosciences*, *136*, 68–79. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2022.07.014

Arampatzi, A. (2017). The spatiality of counter-austerity politics in Athens, Greece: Emergent 'urban solidarity spaces'. *Urban Studies*, *54*(9), 2155–2171. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098016629311

Balampanidis, D., Gyftopoulou, S., Papatzani, E., & Siatitsa, D. (2022). *Vacant houses*. Eteron. https://housing360.eteron.org/vacant-houses/

Balampanidis, D., Papatzani, E., & Pettas, D. (2021). *Το Airbnb στην πόλη: ευκαιρία ή απειλή* [Airbnb in the city: An opportunity or a threat?]. Πόλις.

Dellatsimas, M. (2004). Η τρέχουσα δυναμική της ανάπτυξης της Αθήνας: συμβατικό – νέο πρότυπο και έργα υποδομής [Current dynamics in the development of Athens: conventional – new model and infrastructure projects]. *Γεωγραφίες*, *7*, 48–64.

European Commission. (2015). *The European stability mechanism programme for Greece: Questions and answers*. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_15_5513

Get Golden Visa. (2023). *Greek golden visa: The ultimate guide 2023*. https://getgoldenvisa.com/ultimate-guide-to-greece-golden-visa#ftoc-greece-golden-visa-statistics

Gourzis, K., Alexandridis, G., Gialis, S., & Caridakis, G. (2019). Studying the spatialities of short-term rentals' sprawl in the urban fabric: The case of Airbnb in Athens, Greece. In J. MacIntyre, I. Maglogiannis, L. Iliadis, & E. Pimenidis (Eds.), *Artificial intelligence applications and innovations*, AIAI 2019. *IFIP Advances in Information and Communication Technology*, 560 (pp. 196–207). Springer.

Greek City Times. (2021). Plato's Academy Park regeneration gets the go-ahead. https://greekcitytimes.com/2021/04/15/platos-academy-park-regeneration/

Hadjimichalis, C. (2018). *Τοπία της Κρίσης στη Νότια Ευρώπη: στα Μονοπάτια της Άνισης Γεωγραφικής Ανάπτυξης* [Landscapes of crisis in Southern Europe: On the pathways of uneven geographical development]. Αλεξάνδρεια.

Harvey, D. (1973). *Social justice and the city*. Edward Arnold.

Harvey, D. (1982). *The limits to capital*. Basil Blackwell.

Harvey, D. (2005). *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press.

Harvey, D. (2011). *The enigma of capital*. Profile Books.

Jover, J., & Diaz-Parra, I. (2020). Gentrification, transnational gentrification and touristification in Seville, Spain. *Urban Studies*, *57*(*15*), 3044–3059. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098019857585

Kafetzis, A. (2022). *The changing housing landscape in Greece and "Generation Rent"*. Eteron. https://eteron.org/en/the-changing-housing-landscape-in-greece-and-generation-rent/#footnote_1_522

Kalatzopoulou, M., & Mpelavilas, N. (2014). Από την Ολυμπιάδα στο Μνημόνιο: Η εγκαθίδρυση "εκτάκτων συνθηκών" στον σχεδιασμό και την ανάπτυξη του χώρου [From the Olympiad to the memorandum: The establishment of 'extraordinary circumstances' in spatial planning and development]. *Γεωγραφίες*, *23*, 3–6.

Koutrolikou, P. (2015). Governmentalities of urban crisis in inner-city Athens, Greece. *Antipode*, *48*(*1*), 172–192. https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12163

Krinis, N. (2022). *Sete: Strategy to better shape the future of Athens tourism*. Greek Travel Pages. https://news.gtp.gr/2022/10/18/sete-strategy-better-shape-future-athens-tourism/#:~:text=The%20strategic%20goals%20SETE%20aims,2.6%20billion%20to%204%20billion

Mantouvalou, M., & Mpalla, E. (2004). Μεταλλαγές στο σύστημα γης και οικοδομής και διακυβεύματα του σχεδιασμού στην Ελλάδα σήμερα [Transformations in land and building systems and planning challenges in contemporary greece]. In G. Sarigiannis, D. Oikonomou, & K. Serraos (Eds.), *Πόλη και χώρος από τον 20ο στον 21ο αιώνα* (pp. 331–334). NTUA & University of Thessaly Press.

Massey, D. (1974). Social justice and the city: A review. *Environment and Planning A*, *6*(2), 229–235. https://doi.org/10.1068/a060229

Pettas, D., Avdikos, V., Iliopoulou, E., & Karavasili, I. (2022). Insurrection is not a spectacle': Experiencing and contesting touristification in Exarcheia, Athens. *Urban Geography*, *43*(*7*), 984–1006. https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2021.1888521

Skoufoglou, M. (2013). *Κρίση, Χαρτογραφήσεις του Καπιταλισμού και η Επιστροφή του Χρόνου* [Crisis, mappings of capitalism and the return of time]. ΚΨΜ.

Smith, N. (1996). *The new urban frontier: Gentrification and the revanchist city*. Routledge.

Ta Nea. (2019). *Μητσοτάκης: Επαναφορά της κανονικότητας στα Εξάρχεια*. [Mitsotakis: Restoring normality in Exarcheia]. https://www.tanea.gr/2019/09/08/greece/mitsotakis-epanafora-tis-kanonikotitas-sta-eksarxeia

Vradis, A. (2022). *Unfair and square*. Report No. 3, Vol. 1. Radical Urban Lab. https://rul.st-andrews.ac.uk/rul-report3-unfair-and-square/